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ISSN 1329-7686

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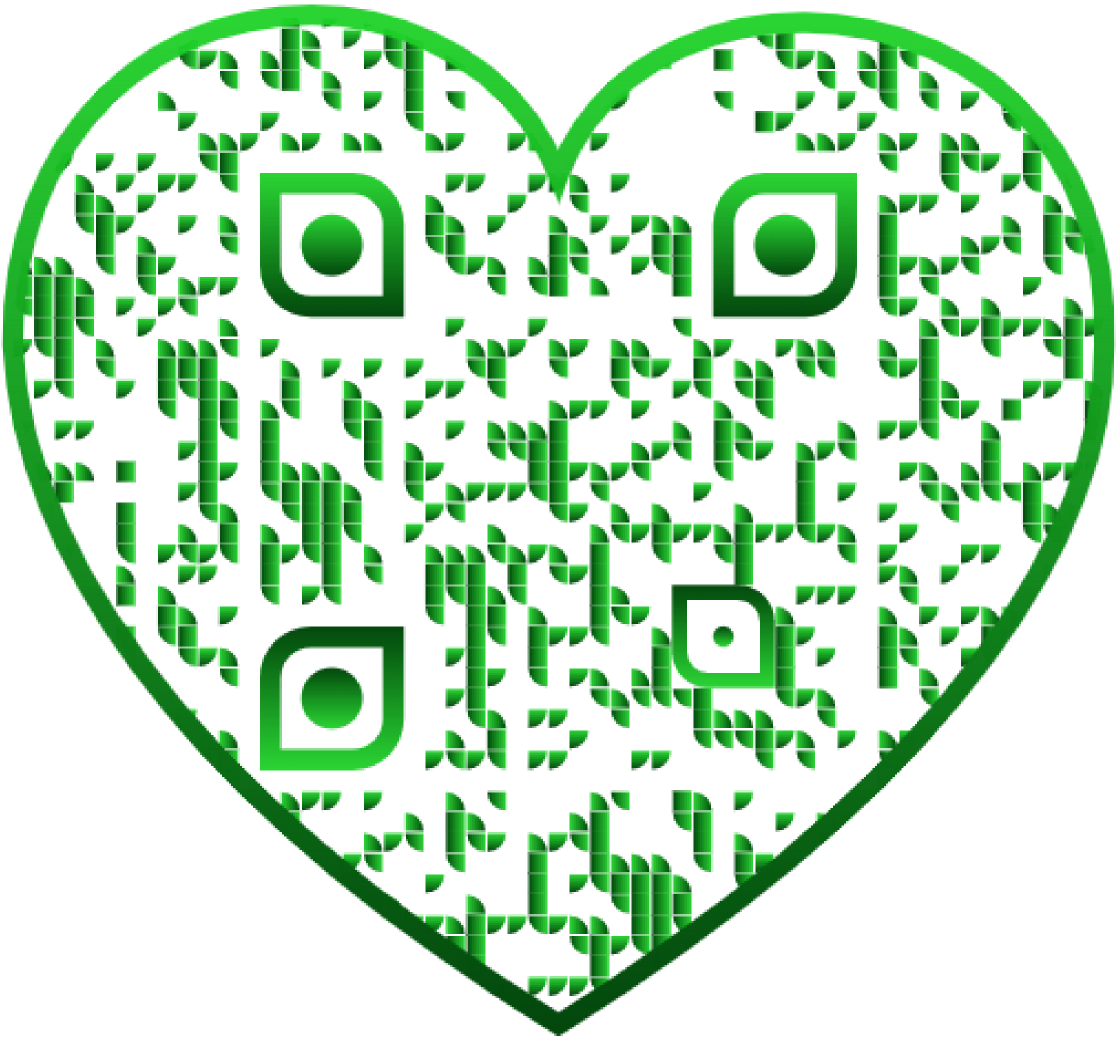

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FENDER TEAMS UP WITH FORNITE TO BRING ITS STRATOCASTER AND PRECISION BASS TO THE DIGITAL REALM

Fender has teamed up with Epic Games to bring two instruments, the Stratocaster and the Precision Bass, to Fortnite. The free-to-play video game is one of the most popular in the world, with over 221 million active players, and has already teamed up with the likes of Marvel, Disney, and Stranger Things to bring instantly recognizable characters to its virtual battlefields. This latest collaboration, however, is its first with an instrument brand.

The in-game add-ons are available in the Item Shop, and can be used in Epic's brand-new music game, Fortnite Festival. Launched in early December, the Fortnite Festival lets users play in a band with friends, or as solo acts, in a Guitar Hero-esque game. The game features playable songs by Jimmy Eat World, Darude, and Katy Perry, but the addition of the Fender-branded virtual instruments will add an extra layer of authenticity to the action.

Fortnite's Jam Stage takes things a step further, allowing players to create unique song mash-ups using jam loops, key selections, and tempo. It's the perfect opportunity to make Katy Perry djent like never before. Epic Games says its latest partnership with Fender "further solidifies the game's commitment to working with the most established and forward-thinking brands in music".

The instruments will also be available in Fortnite's classic Battle Royale format. You could already play as Keanu Reeves' iconic John Wick character, but now you can equip him with a Precision Bass to match the actor's real-life love for low-end. **Words by Phil Weller**

A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

This issue we pay our sincerest respects to the late Di Preece, who worked tirelessly on Australian Guitar and other magazines in its stable as our esteemed advertising coordinator. Among other qualities, Di was the eternal voice of reason during often-raucous team Zoom meetings, and she'll be greatly missed by the small team here at Australian Guitar.

IS ENYA'S CARBON FIBER NOVA GO SONIC THE ALL-IN-ONE ELECTRIC GUITAR OF THE FUTURE?

Enya Music may just have given guitar fans a glimpse of the future with the unveiling of its Nova Go Sonic electric guitar – a forward-thinking, all-in-one single-cut six-string. Functionally fashioned in a similar vein to Vox's "live rig in a gig bag", the APC-1, the Nova Go Sonic looks to take things one step further, with a feature-packed, space age take on the classic Les Paul-style template.

Made from a single cut of carbon fiber composite, it looks and presumably feels like a 21st century guitar, but that feeling is further 'futurized' with a raft of tech that takes it to the next level. It boasts dual humbuckers and onboard effects, which are controllable via an app, as well as a range of outputs and a built-in 10-watt wireless speaker – meaning wherever you go, the gig goes with you.

Headquartered in Shenzhen, China, Enya has a history of innovative and often travel-friendly acoustics and ukulele builds. However, this is its first foray into the big bad world of electric guitars. And what a way to announce your arrival. The Nova Go Sonic weighs just 2.7kg thanks to its super thin body, and it's also ergonomically designed, with an asymmetrical neck profile, and a smooth contoured neck heel for easy upper fret access.

The Nova Go Sonic also looks to marry comfort and playability with premium tones by way of Alnico II and V pickups. Notably, the guitar is powered by an Enya S1 DSP chip, which delivers series and parallel wiring setups to bolster its sonic versatility. As for its onboard gadgetry, the guitar offers a simplistic one-button operation that allows users to toggle between four preset slots, with clean, overdrive, distortion, and high-gain digital effects available.

Via its app, its bank of presets can be tweaked via a three-band EQ and Preamp, Master, and Presence controls. Effects include a six-band EQ, noise gate, delay, and reverb. There's also a choice of chorus, tremolo, and vibrato modulation effects, which can be employed one at a time. **Words by Phil Weller Photo Supplied**

A TREASURE TROVE OF JIMI HENDRIX MUSIC AND DOCUMENTS HAS REPORTEDLY BEEN FOUND AND IS GOING UP FOR SALE

Though posthumous Jimi Hendrix releases have been fairly regular in recent years, even though the Acoustic Ladyland recordings still haven't officially surfaced for release, the impression is that there isn't much left in the vault. But a new report by Mojo suggests that could be about to change, as there's reportedly an 'untouched archive'.

It's part of the estate of Mike Jeffery – the late manager of The Animals and co-manager of Hendrix attached to more than his fair share of controversy. His office at 39 Gerrard Street in London's West End was said to be crammed with memorabilia and recordings but when bailiffs visited they weren't interested in their potential value and it was all left on the floor before being discovered by Jeffery's former assistant and their current custodian Trixie Sullivan.

'Among the archive's wealth of tapes, all in perfect condition, most are contemporaneous copies of recordings that Hendrix engineer Eddie Kramer suspects Experience Hendrix have in their library ("Jimi would have a copy, [producer] Chas [Chandler,co-manager and producer] would have one, and maybe one for Mike," he says),' writes Mojo.

'One, a 7-inch box labelled in red biro in Hendrix's own hand, contains early versions – possibly from Mayfair Studios in New York – of songs destined for Axis: Bold As Love, including thrillingly raw versions of Up From The Skies and Ain't No Telling.'

The music magazine reports that representatives from Experience Hendrix (the company that manages the late guitar legend's estate) have been amongst potential buyers who were booked to view the collection of recordings, letters, telegrams, photos and even a July 1970 Hawaii postcard from Hendrix to Sullivan.

"He was a good guy," Sullivan remembers of Hendrix. "Very shy. Gentle. They all thought I was having an affair with him but I wasn't. I wasn't interested in any of the bands. They were cocky little sods most of them. I was like the big sister clipping them round the ears. Jimi – he was different. He had no idea how good he was." **Words by Rob Laing**

AUSTRALIAN guitar™

#158

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FUTURE

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ACCELERATED TRANSMISSION

INFLUENTIAL '70S ROCKERS **RADIO BIRDMAN** ARE EMBARKING ON AN AUSTRALIA-WIDE FAREWELL TOUR IN JUNE. NOW AN ELDER STATESMAN OF ROCK 'N' ROLL, FOUNDER AND FRONTMAN DENIZ TEK HAD AN INSIGHTFUL CHAT WITH AUSTRALIAN GUITAR.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON**. PHOTO BY **ANNE LAURENT**.

Initially shunned by radio and record labels yet beloved by many, Radio Birdman embraced their outlaw status in a mission to challenge the zeitgeist of '70s Aussie rock. Their oppositional MO was built on a passion for high-energy rock 'n' roll and backed by assertiveness and artistic integrity, which helped them emerge from the Sydney underground scene and onto ABC TV in 1977, three years after their 1974 formation.

1977 was also the year in which Sydney's Trafalgar Records released the first version of their debut album *Radios Appear*. After catching the attention of Seymour Stein, who had visited Australia to sign The Saints, Stein's label Sire Records released an expanded version of *Radios Appear* in 1978. Although briefly labelmates with The Ramones and Talking Heads, Radio Birdman were dropped soon after during Sire's attempts to stave off bankruptcy.

Keyboardist Philip 'Pip' Hoyle was absent from the band at the time of the Sire reissue, leaving Radio Birdman as a five-piece comprised of bassist Warwick Gilbert, co-founding American lead guitarist Deniz Tek, co-founding front man Rob Younger, Canadian guitarist Chris Masuak and drummer Ron Keeley. *Radios Appear* eventually became a pivotal work of Australian rock, renowned for the frenetic rhythms in songs such as 'New Race', and the pummelling muscle in 'Hand Of Law'. Between the Sire and Trafalgar releases, lovers of Radio Birdman are still divided as to which version is better. For diehard logo-bearing fans, or those seeking a conversion, the only true way to experience the Birdman blitz was to attend one of their live shows.

The group left Australia in 1977 for an ill-fated tour of the United Kingdom, during which time they played three shows with The Saints at Paddington Town Hall, and recorded their second album *Living Eyes* in Wales before breaking up. Before Trafalgar's release of *Radios Appear*, Radio Birdman's Town Hall gig drew a few hundred people; in December 1977, after the LP's release, they attracted two thousand. Audio of that gig was released by Citadel in 2015 and is still available.

The group reformed in 1996 to play the Big Day Out, and has toured occasionally ever since. From his coffee farm in Kona, Hawaii, Tek talked to Australian Guitar about Radio Birdman's early days, his Michigan connections, and his love for high speeds.

After all these years, is the goal for Radio Birdman to still push yourselves and the songs further?

There's no point in going out there unless you try to push beyond a boundary that you haven't pushed past before. You're just going backwards if you don't do that.

Ray Ahn from the Hard-Ons is a big Radio Birdman fan, and they'll be support band at the Manning Bar in July. Writing about Radio Birdman in 2020 for Rolling Stone, Ahn said that your band's subterranean existence in the late '70s might have been a big reason for the uncompromising maelstrom of your sound. What do you say to that?

Our sound might have been the reason that we were subterranean in the first place. Rock 'n' roll with a lot of energy and passion, real hard and real fast. Nobody else was doing it. We couldn't get gigs anywhere. We didn't start out wanting to be outsiders, but we were. We adopted that as motivation for us to go even further with what we were doing. We didn't want to compromise.

It was lucky that you guys got your Oxford Funhouse residency (*Ed note: After struggling to get gigs in Sydney, Radio Birdman scored a long residency at the Oxford Tavern in Darlinghurst from mid-1975*).

That was pure luck. Do you know the story?

I'd like to know.

Lou Reed was in town and I had met him at the airport. I went to his press conference, and he was giving the journalists a real hard time. I went up to him and gave him one of our band T-shirts and said I was a fan, and then he was really interested. He wanted to know whether we were playing anywhere.

Of course we didn't have any gigs, but he said "just tell my assistant where you're playing, and I'll come". I said "OK, great". So Rob and I start scrambling for a gig. [Reed] was only going to be in town for a few days. We went to The Oxford where Rob had played with his band The Rats; he knew the guy that ran the place. We talked to him and said, "if you let us play here on Friday night, Lou Reed will come", and he goes, "OK, I can't pay you, but if you want to play and Lou Reed will come that's fine". We started telling our friends, they told their friends, then Friday night comes. I tell Lou Reed's personal assistant where we're going to be. The place was packed. It's a tiny venue and it totally went off, but Lou Reed, of course, doesn't come. I don't know why, but because it went so well, [the owner] had us back. Pretty soon we were playing there every Friday and Saturday night, and that went on for a few years. This was in 1975.

Who was it that misheard 'radio burning' in The Stooges' '1970' as 'radio birdman'?

I guess it was me and Rob. [The Stooges'] Ronnie Asheton told me that the actual lyric as written is 'radio buzzin''. That was just our take on it.

What guitars will you be using for the 50th anniversary tour?

It'll mainly be my Epiphone Crestwood, a '65 Crestwood Deluxe that used to belong to Fred 'Sonic' Smith of the MC5. I got it from him in 1973. I'll also have a Telecaster that has a '52 body and an Esquire neck. As the backup I have a '65 Epiphone Coronet.

What's the amp set up?

I've mostly just been using my single Marshall MK II head through a quad.

Do you use overdrive pedals for your tone?

It's almost all amp, but I use a volume boost pedal.

I heard that some of Birdman's early career goals were supporting The Stooges and blowing Skyhooks off stage.

[Skyhooks] never invited us to support them for some reason.

But you actually got to play in The Stooges in 2011.

That's right.

Was that your first time meeting Iggy?

No, I'd met him before. We come from Ann Arbor.

How did you guys first meet?

When I was in school, he had a job at the record store in town. He was behind the counter. He was supposed to be selling records, but he was mostly talking to girls. The first time I ever ran into him was in that store. I knew the Asheton brothers, and through them I met Iggy a couple of times later on. On our tour in the UK in 1978, he came through with his band. We went and saw them play in London and we all went out to dinner. The Stooges played the Big Day Out in '05 or '06, and I was talking to Iggy backstage there. When Ronnie [Asheton] died [in 2009], we chatted on the phone.

When you were playing with Ron in New Race in 1981, did you share any tips and tricks?

I was in awe of him [when I was] a young guitar player, along with Wayne Kramer and Keith Richards and Pete Townsend. Those were the guys that I wanted to be like. I would always ask Ron about what guitars and amps he used. He said he liked to use a Pig Nose amp in the studio. An 8-inch speaker, cranked.

When you performed in The Stooges, you had gotten practice playing their song 'TV Eye' as a cover with Radio Birdman, but you also played 'Loose', 'Dirt' and a third one...

'Real Cool Time'. Then James [Williamson] and [saxophonist] Steve Mackay came on and we did 'No Fun' at the end.

Jonathan Sequeira edited the music video for 'I Need Somebody' from Acoustic K.O., one of the two James Williamson albums that you featured on. Was this before or after he had started work on Descent Into The Maelstrom?

After.

How did he first approach the Birdman crew about making the doco?

He really seemed motivated to do it, and we gave the interviews, but the band couldn't approve it ahead of time. When it came out, I had no idea what was actually going to be in that film until I saw it. It came across as being very honest. I thought it was really well done. The music was front and centre.

I recently came across the '95 remix of '455 SD' from *Living Eyes*. That blew me away.

That was never available on vinyl, so we're going to remaster and reissue that alternate mix of Living Eyes on vinyl. That'll be coming up fairly soon. We're actually doing the whole back catalogue that way.

That's fantastic. When is the *Living Eyes* reissue coming out?

Maybe by the end of the year.

"WE DIDN'T KILL EACH OTHER. WE REMEMBERED THE GOOD THINGS. WE'D ALL LEARNT FROM THE MISTAKES OF THE PAST."

It must have been a thrill playing at the 1996 Big Day Out, after you guys reunited.

It was a thrill. We didn't know if it would work. We had finished with all kinds of personal problems in the band. We didn't know if we could even bring ourselves to like each other again. Part of what led to that was the [1995] remix of *Living Eyes*, because that made us all get together for the first time since 1978, minus Ron [Keeley]. We didn't kill each other. We remembered the good things. We'd all learnt from the mistakes of the past.

You guys have been together ever since.

Yeah, on and off. We've had some line up changes, but there's three original members in the band. Jim [Dickson] our bass player has been in the band for 25 years. The other two guys are Dave [Kettley] on guitar and Nik [Reith] on drums. The current line up is ten years old.

Did your brother encourage you to join the Marines in the mid-80s?

It was his example that I was following, because I've always been a big fan of airplanes and jets. When he joined the Air Force, I visited him at his training base and that's when I really got the bug. I was almost too old by then.

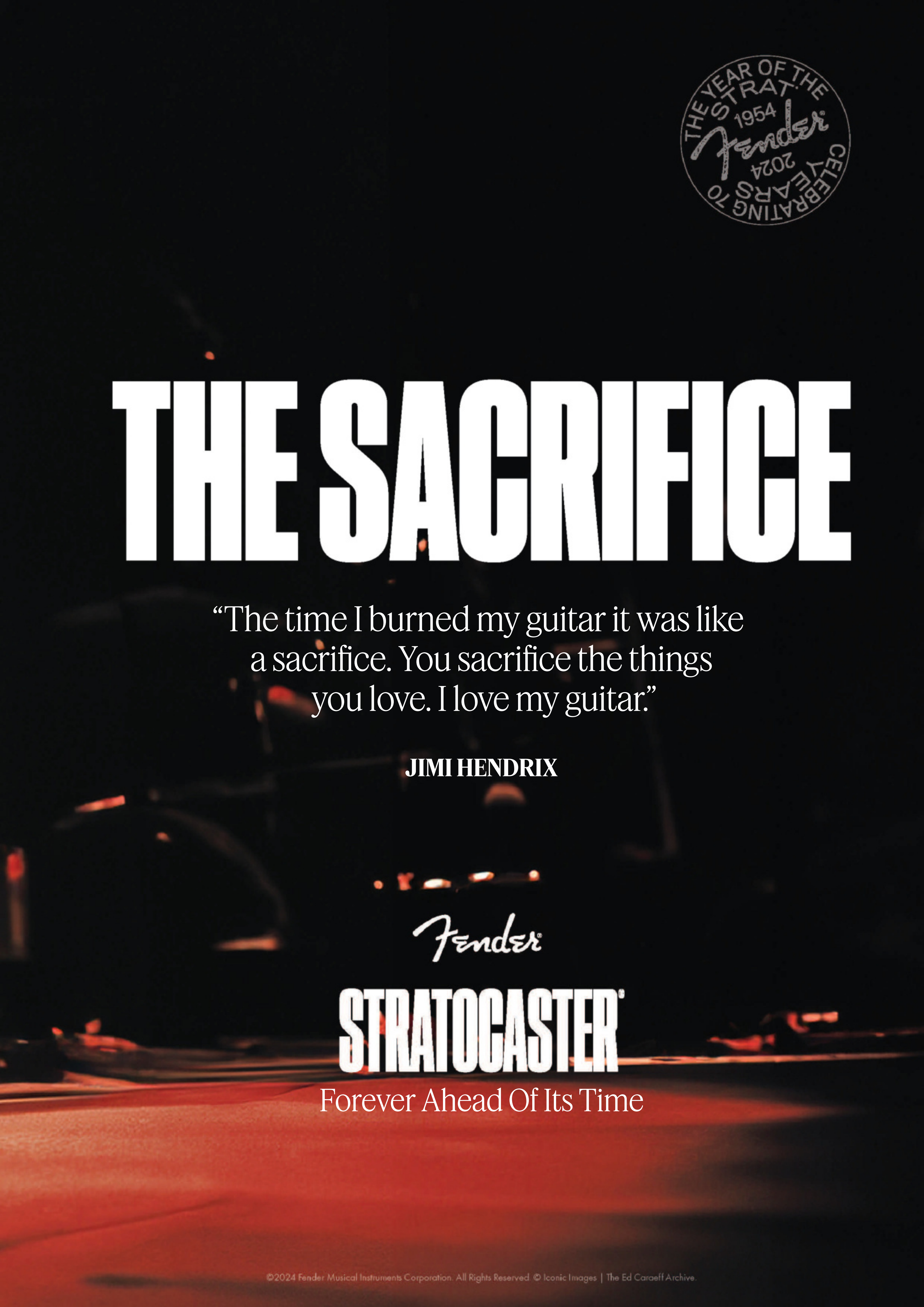
It seems that you like both high-speed music AND high-speed planes.

I like anything that goes fast.

How does it feel to fly in the back of an F-4 Phantom?

There's no feeling like it. When you take off and they light the afterburners, you get pinned back in the seat with acceleration. It's power, man. It's wonderful.

Radio Birdman tours Australia for the last time in June and July with support from Civic in Melbourne, Hits in Brisbane and Hard-Ons in Sydney. Check out full dates on Oztix.com.au (VIC and NSW) or Mostix.com.au (QLD).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INTERCHANGED AND ARRANGED

FIVE YEARS SINCE HER LAST RECORD, AND AFTER A PERIOD SPENT ADRIFT IN COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS, GENRE-HOPPING MELBOURNE SONGWRITER **JESS RIBEIRO** IS BACK WITH HER THIRD SOLO ALBUM *SUMMER OF LOVE*. RIBEIRO CAUGHT UP WITH AUSTRALIAN GUITAR.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON**. PHOTO BY **NICK MCKK.**

Jess Ribeiro spent her childhood in the ambience of regional NSW Chinese restaurants, where her father worked as a chef, before decamping to Darwin in 2007 to pursue study and music. There she founded Jess Ribeiro And The Bone Collectors, and released her debut EP *Pilgrimage* in late 2008. This was followed by 2012's *My Little River*, her first and only full-length album with The Bone Collectors, a gentle collection of "unhurried, beautifully melancholy folk". From that debut full length came 'Truckyard', whose clip was filmed in a 1970s-style Chinese restaurant in Melbourne's inner suburbs.

Ribeiro released her first post-Bone Collectors album in 2015, titled *Kill It Yourself*, which demonstrated a darker and more ornately orchestrated approach to country adjacent songwriting. Another stark departure followed with 2019's *LOVE HATE*, which gazed in the direction of indie rock and saturated trip-hop, while retaining the noir abrasures of her previous record.

Riberio's solo work is supplemented by an impressive range of collaborations: She's lent her vocals and guitar skills to recordings by Kurt Vile, Courtney Barnett and Mick Harvey, and toured as a backing singer with Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. Her long-awaited third album, *Summer Of Love*, released on April 12 after a five year wait. Harkening back both to her childhood and her early career, the clip for second single 'Everything Is Now' was also filmed in a Chinese restaurant, and featured contemporary dancer Tony Yap. Ribeiro shared insight into her craft with Australian Guitar.

You've traversed many musical styles over the last fifteen years. Your recent single 'Summer Of Love' is a tender piano ballad. How do you explain your chameleonic artistic nature?

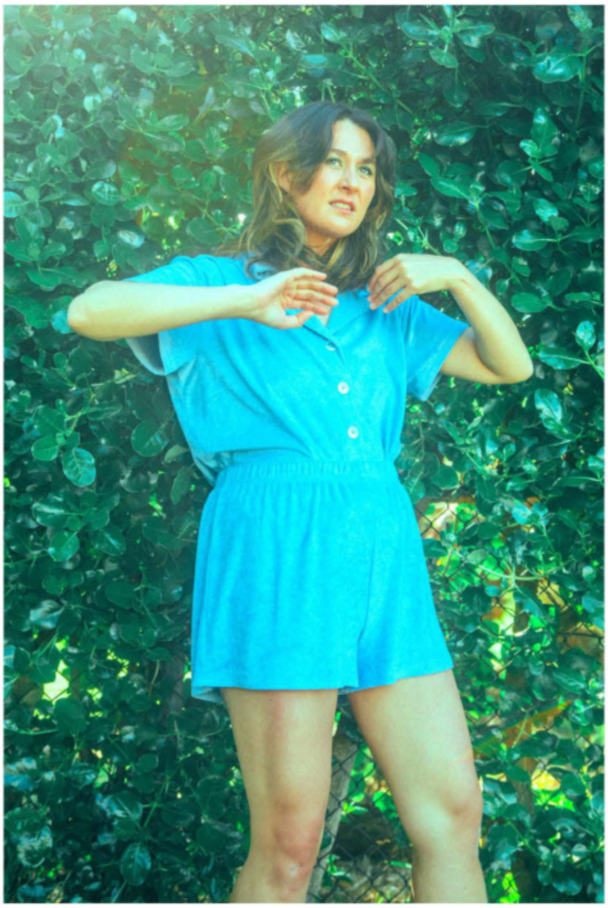
I'm a curious person who is open to collaboration, and different genres.

I heard that the first demo for your new album's title track, 'Summer Of Love', was recorded in a shack on the Great Ocean Road.

There were demos made all over the place. It was a very fragmented time, and I couldn't get into a consistent flow with anyone. By the time I met Nick Huggins, I wanted to make something very sparse and quiet. I didn't have very much energy, because of all of the opening-closing-opening-closing. Nick is a very gentle person who works in an organic way, which really suited where I was, mentally.

How did you begin writing 'Summer Of Love'?

The lyrics probably came first, a few years ago when we were in lockdown mode. I had a friend who went missing, the case was reopened, and I had to retell the story of her disappearance to some podcasters on a show called Case File. That inspired the writing of the song. I wrote the lyrics first. I tried out many different versions. I did a version with John Castle as an '80s pop number. I also did a version with Mick Harvey that was Velvet Underground-inspired. I settled on the version with Nick, which felt appropriate to how I was feeling and what I wanted to make. It's basically piano and strings and a little bit of drums at the end of the song.



The last track on Summer of Love is called 'Howl', which reminds me of the famous Allen Ginsberg poem. Did that factor into the title of the song at all, or is that just another coincidence?

That's a really great coincidence, because I love Allen Ginsberg, but when I wrote the song, I wasn't thinking of him at all. I was inspired by the Grampians and its animals, and the state of the world. I felt desperate and frustrated by what was and what is happening on a global level. Being in nature amidst all of these animals, they felt very communicative. On reflection, I didn't put those pieces of the puzzle together until just recently. I thought that was a nice coincidence.

What was it like working with Jim White from The Dirty Three?

I recorded 'Summer Of Love' during lockdown of 2021 and 2022 with Nick Huggins, who engineered and produced the album at his beachside studio. He suggested that Jim White could play drums, because he's worked with The Dirty Three before. I said no, as I was feeling quite vulnerable, but then I saw Jim perform with Gareth Liddiard in Castlemaine. Jim is a beautiful drummer, so I changed my mind. He was a very easygoing person to work with.

What main guitar will you be playing on your upcoming tour of Europe and the UK?

I have a Cole Clarke electric. It plays really well, and it's lightweight. It's served me well over the years. It's never felt very precious to me, I've bashed it around, but it's been a great companion, and it's been very reliable.

How did the recent tour with Gareth Liddiard go?

It was a solo tour. He's a very nice human being. It was great to be on tour, playing solo. He's a good songwriter. I really upped my performance in his presence. I had to. I learned a lot from being with him and watching his shows. I think it really enhanced me as a solo performer. When you see someone perform solo, who you usually see with a band, it takes a lot of artistry, skill, and connecting with the audience. Gareth does a very good job of that.

With the songs on your new album being composed in such a fragmented way, as you said, did you use any new composition methods for certain tracks?

Everything was an experiment. Usually I would rehearse the band, go into the studio and feel strong, whereas this was a very different approach. In some instances, Nick would create some kind of analog tape loop that we would use as a starting point, and I'd play the guitar over the top of it with a couple of piano chords. Other times he would play a drum beat that we would put on the loop, and work from there. It was like a collage, almost. It was an unstructured way of working. That's how it came into existence.

You must be looking forward to showcasing this new musical chapter, when it comes out.

I'm excited to do live shows with the band. To have the saxophone and strings playing with the drums and electric guitars. It's gonna be really thrilling to share that with people.

Jess Ribeiro's *Summer of Love* is out now via Poison City Records.

ELECTRONIC EVOLUTION

FROM REALMS OF THE ELECTRIC TO THE ELECTRONIC, SYDNEY-BASED PSYCHEDELIC POP DUO **VELVET TRIP** ARRIVED AT THE RELEASE OF THEIR DEBUT ALBUM *HARMONY BLOOMS* BEFORE A THREE MONTH- LONG EAST COAST TOUR THAT INCLUDED SHOWS WITH JOHN BUTLER TRIO AND OCEAN ALLEY. CORE DUO ZEPPELIN HAMILTON AND CLAYTON ALLEN JOINED AUSTRALIAN GUITAR FOR AN ILLUMINATING DISCUSSION.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON**. PHOTO BY **JACQUI MITCHELL**

Velvet Trip's origins can be traced back to a house party in Sydney's inner west six years ago, where Clayton Allen and Zeppelin Hamilton first met. Not long after that first meeting, the duo recorded their debut EP at Leichhardt's Parliament Studios, where they likely discussed their formative musical influences together, such as the recordings of Jimi Hendrix and Hamilton's namesake, Led Zeppelin. After playing guitar in Byron Bay-based hardcore and thrash bands such as Prowler, the next stage in Hamilton's creative evolution began with the release of *Velvet Trip & The Six Moon Skies* in 2019.

Its six tracks were recorded completely live by their long-time collaborator Phan Sjarif (Middle Kids, Birds Of Tokyo), with Sinj Clarke on keyboards and Nick Savvas on bass. The EP's hallucinogenic atmosphere was further enhanced by Hamilton's effects-laden guitar and bluesy vocals, along with Allen's crisp and emphatic drums.

Mid-2022 marked the arrival of 'It's Only Human', the first single off the group's debut LP *Harmony Blooms*. It signalled a radical departure from the sound of the EP, with Hamilton's travels through Europe credited with inspiring more varied electronic textures. After demoing, the duo teamed up again with Sjarif, Clarke and Savvas to co-produce *Harmony Blooms* between their home studio and Parliament Studios, with Sydney poet Jazz Money guesting on the track 'Strange Love'. Hamilton and Allen joined Australian Guitar to expand upon the rich history of Velvet Trip.

How did you both get interested in mind-altering sounds?

CA: I guess it was through the music I was exposed to while growing up. My dad is a huge music fan, particularly of folk-bluesy-rock stuff from the 60s and onward. I guess the same goes for Zeppelin.

ZH: My dad's a musician, and I grew up listening to Jimi Hendrix, and obviously Led Zeppelin. It's my name. I listened to a lot of early psychedelia, I was always really inspired by that. I've gotten into modern psych music as well. We both love bands like Tame Impala, King Gizzard And The Lizard Wizard, and we're big fans of Kikigaku Moyo. We have both played in psych-rock bands before, and we have been channeling it and trying to make our own voice within that space for quite a while.

I heard that back in the day, Zeppelin, you were involved in metal and hardcore bands in Byron Bay, so you've come a long way from that.

ZH: Yeah, I used to play in heaps of hardcore bands when I was growing up in Byron. I was super into deathcore, sweep-picking and heavy stuff. It's still in there.

I heard you two met at a house party in the inner west, then decided to record your first EP, Velvet Trip & The Six Moon Skies. With that being a totally live, guitar-based rock EP, and the new album Harmony Blooms being a lot more synth based with cleaner pop production, what influenced that shift?

ZH: It was a situational thing. When we first met, it was very spontaneous, we put the band together quite fast and recorded an EP almost within a month. Between that time and now there's been a lot of growth on personal levels and musical levels. I broke my hand and couldn't play guitar anymore. So that's why there's so much synth there. A lot of the album was written on synth. I had to learn to play one-handed on a keyboard, and I hadn't played keys before. A lot of the sounds came from that, and that set the trajectory for the record. I was just singing into GarageBand on my laptop [while] making the rest, playing the bass and keys and even some pan flutes and some other rogue things. Just trying to get something out because I couldn't play guitar. We fell into a happy accident.

How's your hand now?

ZH: Yeah, it's good. It took a long time. It was pretty scary. I started off only being able to play for ten minutes a day, then I went to so many different physiotherapists and I ended up increasing [my playing time] to ten minutes, three times a day, slowly building strength. It took about a year to fully get better. Now I can play and it's all good.

That's good. Do you mind me asking how your hand injury happened?

ZH: Clay and I were skating.

Getting back to the album, I really like the percussion on 'Electric Dreams'. It kind of reminded me of a Grateful Dead song, like 'Scarlet Begonias' or 'Touch Of Grey'. How did you get involved in creating the percussion for that, Clayton?

CA: I guess it comes from the feeling of that track. It was pretty apparent that it was a very uplifting, positive vibe that we were going for. It was obvious that the drum groove wasn't quite enough to carry the track rhythmically. So I think in the studio, I just started improvising heaps of different parts on a triangle, a little wood block, a shaker, all these different things, then we pieced it together and produced all the layers. It was a bit of an experiment in improvising live takes to the track until we pieced together the right groove.

The acoustic guitar in the intro of 'Strange Love' stood out to me. Does Harmony Blooms have a few songs that were built from guitar pieces or single melodies?

ZH: Well, 'Strange Love' was rewritten about five or six times. The chords and the lyrics completely changed. [During COVID], when Sinj finally got here [from Melbourne], 'Strange Love' happened in one session. I just got on the acoustic, Sinj was on the piano, and we basically played through the progression in one take. The initial bones of the songs were written on [electronic] keys, and then later in the studio I went back and added guitar on things. I had never done that before. We had to try and find room and make guitar parts for the songs because they were so keys-heavy. When we were recording the album, my hands still weren't 100%, so a lot of the guitar work is quite minimal. I think it worked out for the better. It's definitely going to inform the next record I think, steering away from heavy-handed guitar work. I'm feeling much more inclined to be quite minimal and selective about how guitar parts sit in songs.

In the video for 'Voodoo Cosmic Girl' for Fender, you were rocking a white Strat, Hendrix-style, so I'm guessing you've moved away from that now, Zeppelin?

ZH: I still rock the white Strat. When we play live, our approach to the songs is to bring as much energy to the set as we can. Everything should be interchangeable and you should be able to jam on things, but in the studio, I think intention, selected melodies and restraint is always better.

Velvet Trip's *Harmony Blooms* LP is out now both in digital and vinyl formats via velvettrip.bandcamp.com

CARNIVAL OF THRILLS

AFTER BARRELLING THROUGH A KALEIDOSCOPIC BLEND OF MUSICAL STYLES IN A WHIRLWIND 15 YEARS OF EXPERIMENTAL CREATIVITY, **MR. BUNGLE** HAS BEEN REBORN IN THEIR INITIAL THRASH METAL FORMAT AFTER A 19 YEAR HIATUS. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR EXPLORED THESE OUTER REACHES WITH BASSIST TREVOR DUNN.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON**. LEAD PHOTO BY **BUZZ OSBOURNE.**

Mr. Bungle has evolved through a wild variety of contrasting musical styles. Sometimes described as 'circus ska' or 'weirdo funk', their three major label studio records – including *California*, *Disco Volante* and their self-titled 1990 debut – are entirely different to what the group played when they formed as a 'death metal' band in 1985. Indeed, their debut 1986 demo *The Raging Wrath of The Easter Bunny* shows the band dabbling in thrash and punk before expanding their influences to include the likes of Oingo Boingo and Camper Van Beethoven, while still retaining traces of Slayer and Anthrax.

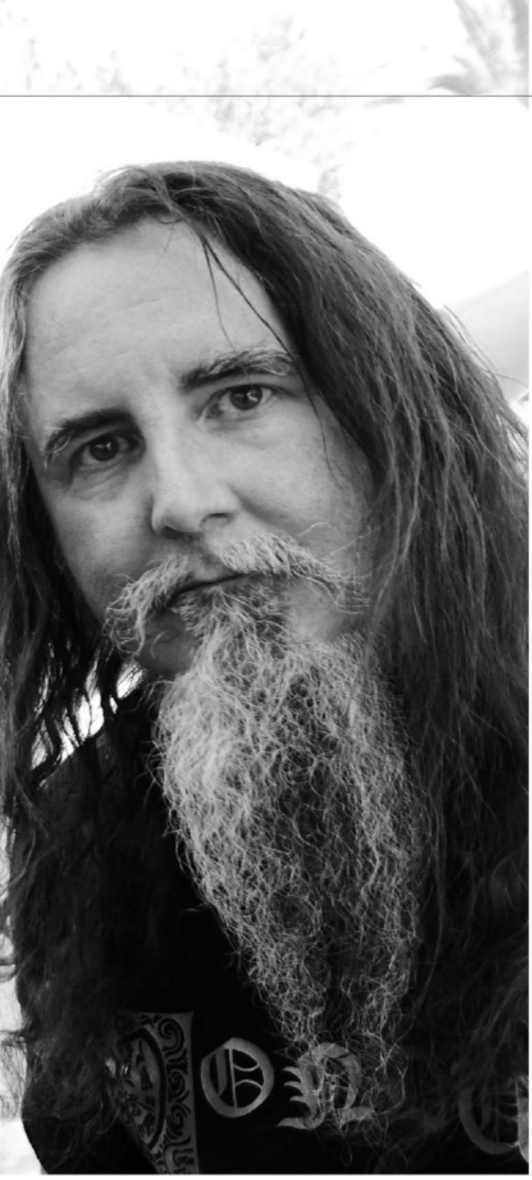
Featuring the woozy, squeaky saxophone playing of past member Clinton 'Bär' McKinnon and the tribal-yet-jazzy playing of former Bungle drummer Danny Heifetz, the disorienting artistic elements preserved on Mr. Bungle's three Warner Brothers albums are far removed from metal and punk, but they're what solidified the group's reputation as a famous cult band with a punkish spirit. So too did the success of co-founding member and lead vocalist Mike Patton, whose work with Faith No More helped get Mr. Bungle signed.

Patton's prolificness is mirrored by that of his longtime collaborator, Bungle bassist Trevor Dunn. A solo artist and composer in his own right, Dunn played with Patton in Fantômas and Tomohawk, while his time in Melvins (Lite) had him work with the highly influential sludge metal/weird rock group in a new format between 2006 and 2016. Melvins' co-founder, guitarist and lead vocalist Buzz Osbourne, is also listed as a past Fantômas member, and a member of The Fantômas Melvins Big Band (which included two drummers and two bassists). The third remaining original Bungle member, Trey Spraunce, also played for a short time in Faith No More, but has spent most of his long career as founding member of avant-garde collective Secret Chiefs 3, which has enlisted all other members of Mr. Bungle at various times.

24 years after their last Australian tour in 2000 and an ensuing hiatus of 19 years, Patton, Dunn and Spraunce returned to our shores in March to demonstrate Mr. Bungle's current talents as the reincarnated metal band formed in 1980s California. Joining the trio as current Bungle members are two figures from the group's formative metal years: drummer Dave Lombardo of Slayer fame, and Scott Ian, rhythm guitarist in Anthrax. They toured with (the) Melvins as part of The Raging Wrath Of Australia And New Zealand. Australian Guitar spoke to Trevor Dunn about his musical origins and the re-recorded early wrath of Mr. Bungle.

For Mr. Bungle's 2019 reunion, did the idea of working with Dave Lombardo and Scott Ian come first, or the decision to revisit *The Raging Wrath Of The Easter Bunny* demo from 1986?

The idea was prompted after meeting Dave Lombardo because [Mike] Patton put together this



band Fantômas that I was involved in with Buzz Osborne and Dave. Me and Trey and Mike had been with the other guys in 'Bungle proper', as I like to call it, with Danny and Bär. We used to occasionally throw in some of those tunes into our set, but nobody knew what they were, because no one had heard the original demo from the '80s. But after meeting Dave, it made sense. In a way, it was written with Slayer in mind, and all those '80s thrash bands. I mean, they were huge influences for us in the '80s. So after meeting Dave, we thought, well what if we did this, and he was down. I was actually kind of surprised that everyone was down for it. Then we decided to add Scott, because we figured it would be good to have a rhythm guitar player as well.

Was this because you needed more onstage musicians to make performing this music a reality again?

Yeah, but we re-recorded it with Dave and Scott, so this is the version you now know. Just the five of us, which is actually really simple. It's kind of the simplest format that Bungle has ever operated in before. In the '90s, when we were playing stuff from our Warner Brothers records, there were a lot of triggered samples and keyboard sounds and extra musicians, but this time we just have two guitars, bass, drums and vocals. Super simple.

Is that why most of the Warner Brothers catalogue hasn't been revisited this time around?

To revisit that stuff is a whole other can of worms. It's something that we've considered over the years, to do it with Danny and Bär, who were the guys who played that music on the records. But now we're kind of going back to our roots, essentially, which was '80s metal.

The revamping of that old demo was a great idea. I saw some of your recent set lists and 'My Ass Is On Fire' from the first album has made it in.

We worked up a truncated version of it. Partly because people have been asking us about whether we were going to reunite for years. We did a reunion, but of course we did it our way, which wasn't what people were expecting, or wanting, but that's always been the way that we've operated. To do whatever the hell we want. We thought, 'well, what's a song from the Warner Brothers era that we could work up to appease the audience'. But also, it's fun for us. That's one of the songs that we still like from that era, and it's adaptable to guitars. A lot of that music from the '90s era is not adaptable. It has to be done in a certain way. Now we're a little bit slower and older, but we're still proving that we can play thrash metal.

Did that perspective influence the re-recording of *The Raging Wrath*?

Yeah, because the original demo was pretty amateurishly produced. We were just learning how to play our instruments. We'd only been playing a couple of years, individually, and Mike had never sang before. So we just felt like the tunes were worth a more professional treatment. We took a lot of those '80s influences and really stretched those ideas as far as we could when we were teenagers. We felt like our music deserved a little more recognition.

"NOW WE'RE KIND OF GOING BACK TO OUR ROOTS, ESSENTIALLY, WHICH WAS '80S METAL."

Do you remember when you first heard a piece of 'weird' music?

I used to listen to college radio a lot. It's now defunct, but there was a university where I grew up, and they had a radio station called KSU. A lot of students had radio shows, so when I was 11 or 12 I would hear these kids who were probably in their 20s just play the weirdest punk rock and stuff. I remember hearing the band X from LA in the '80s, and there was this song called 'Nausea' from their first record. It's a really bizarre song. It's hard to call it punk rock. It's kind of slow and dirty, with weird chords. For some reason I was like, 'what is this man, I have to know what this is'. I used to call in to the radio station and request it, and eventually I went out and bought the vinyl.

Did you get into metal before getting into jazz? Jazz is a big part of your musical career as well.

I kind of got into both genres at the same time. I mean, I started playing bass when I was 13, in 1981, when heavy metal was just starting to grow and expand. At the same time, I had music teachers who turned me on to jazz and fusion and all the great bass players that I've learned to appreciate, so I found it all interesting. While I was studying jazz and composition, I was also keeping up to date with whatever new metal was coming out.

I heard you even co-founded a Metallica covers band with Mike Patton before you co-founded Mr. Bungle?

Well, it was a metal band called Fiend, but all we did was cover songs. A lot of Metallica, Slayer, Anthrax, Armored Saint and Motörhead. I was actually playing rhythm guitar in that band, and I was not a very good guitar player.

Your first instrument was clarinet, though, right?

Yeah, clarinet. I moved from clarinet to bass, added guitar and took piano lessons in college, along with vocal lessons.

I've heard that a lot of bassists in the '80s decided to learn bass in order to join bands, because bassists were always in demand. A lot of people wanted to be like Eddie Van Halen or Randy Rhoads, so other kids were learning how to play bass so they could get into bands easier. Were you one of those kids too?

Sort of, because my older brother, who I mentioned, was playing guitar. We used to crank up KISS records in our bedroom, as we shared a bedroom, and I learned how to play along with the songs, KISS and the Scorpions and all this stuff. I looked up to him, so I wanted to do what he was doing, but I didn't want to do exactly the same thing. To be honest, I'm not even sure if I knew the difference between a bass and a guitar. I just knew that every band had a bass player, so I decided I was going to do that. Just by chance, personality-wise, it ended up the perfect instrument for me.

Having grown up as an '80s metal kid, does it still feel kind of surreal to look over to the other players in Mr. Bungle on stage and see Dave from Slayer or Scott from Anthrax?

Yeah, it's bizarre. I remember the first time I rehearsed with Dave with Fantômas, and I was like, 'what the hell', you know? I'm just pinching myself, trying to keep it together so I can play the song, you know? It's funny because Scott has kind of said the same thing. He said he was a fan of Bungle before we asked him to join. He's having the time of his life. Both him and Dave are really serious about the music, you know, they really put a lot of energy into it.

Are you currently working on any new recordings?

I'm writing some music for some of my own projects. I have a septet that released a record in 2021, under my own name on this label, Pyroclastic. I'm working on new set of music for that right now.

RADICALS OF RESOURCEFULNESS

ON THEIR NEWEST LP *PLAYING DEAD*, EXPERIMENTAL INDIE-ROCKERS **OBSCURA HAIL** DISH UP RICHLY TEXTURED ODDITIES WITH REAL POP SMARTS. THE MELBOURNE TRIO CHATS WITH AUSTRALIAN GUITAR TO EXPLAIN HOW IT ALL CAME ABOUT.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON**.

Melbourne trio Obscura Hail has performed on stages draped in black VHS tape, and in front of projections of their own DIY footage of bushfires and portrayals of priests, nuns, undertakers and madmen. Before drummer Kaelan Edmond joined, Obscura Hail's beats issued from a Nintendo DS drum machine, which accompanied the basslines of former stand-up comic Tamara Issa. Established by their once-nomadic frontman-guitarist Sean Conran during the MySpace era as a solo-acoustic folk project, the earliest Obscura Hail music was quietly recorded inside a house in Nowra. He now performs on stages wearing an electric lap steel guitar that he plays while standing.

Conran's current song-writing career was initially inspired by the time he spent in his old punk band, Vinyl Irony. It was then spurred on by a toxic relationship, which led to over 600 acoustic songs being uploaded onto Soundcloud. The secret behind Conran's early prolificness is startling yet simple. "I found myself writing more after I thought I was losing my memory, but I was just being gaslit by my partner at the time", he explains. By summarising the events of each of his days into song form he gradually created a musical record of occurrences, through which he could retrace the actions of any given day.

While most of those old songs are inaccessible now, and his creative motives have changed, Conran's archival talents have benefitted Obscura Hail's sound through the cataloguing of a vast amount of demo recordings, melodies and other ideas that can be heard on their third album, Playing Dead. Australian Guitar dug deep.

I've got to ask, how do you use a Nintendo DS as a drummer?

Sean Conran: So there's a program called DS KORG, which is a pretty rare thing to find in cartridge form for the Nintendo DS. So I just got an R4 card and jail broke the integrity so I could load the firmware onto that. You can sequence hits, it's got the LIN kit, an 808 and a 606 on it. Sequence it and press play. Sometimes we'd grab certain parts from it to loop on the loop pedal. It was a main tool for us for a while.

A drum machine that can fit in your pocket.

Tamara Issa: Well that's the thing, somebody put it in their pocket after show. They stole it. So we were like, 'OK, I guess we need an actual drummer'.

SC: So word out to whoever stole it.

TI: We're still looking for you!

SC: I've replaced it with a different Nintendo DS and I've tried to get the same kind of setup, but it's impossible. Please return it.

So with the acoustic origins of Obscura Hail, I've heard it described as 'freak folk' music. Are any of your old recordings still online, Sean?

SC: We did take quite a few of them down, they're all private on Bandcamp right now. There are CDs that I used to do DIY at the time and sell at shows, give to friends and leave on trains and buses. Somebody out there has probably got some of the original songs.

TI: There's a lot of stuff up there that we've done, just hours and hours of continuous recording, while playing around with gear. Sean is so good at cataloging everything, saving it and having it there for us. We draw from a lot of stuff that we don't even remember we did, because there's so much of it.

SC: I'm afraid of forgetting it. If you're recording at the same time as you're writing something, you don't have to think about it later. You can just let it sit for a couple of years, and when you come back to it, you're like, 'I have a vague recollection of doing this guitar shape'. The LPs got a lot of that in it. There's heaps of old layers, like demos from ten or seven years ago, hidden underneath all this new stuff that we added over the top.

That's a really interesting approach. Is that a new way of going about writing songs, as opposed to your previous EP?

SC: The EP was the same. Everything is sort of borrowed from something that we've done before or something that we've catalogued away.

TI: I mean, there was some stuff that was totally brand new, like 'Playing Dead', the first single.

As someone who plays drums in a The Cure cover band, I have to bring this up: I heard you used to be a bit of a goth?

SC: I was, yeah. I had the look but I didn't necessarily have the attitude. If you take the lyrics from Disintegration, add baroque progressions, and resolve it in a really nice, happy kind of manner, to leave people feeling good but also a bit conflicted, that's kind of the approach that we take [in Obscura Hail]. There's definitely dark imagery but its a playful kind of darkness, like a Tim Burton approach.

With some of your older songs like 'Come Down' and 'Doomer', and the low-fi instruments in those songs, are they old recordings that had been repurposed, or were they recorded like that at the time?

SC: I think, with 'Come Down', it was just a loop through a lapel mic, which was shaky and breaking, so it had a bit of a crackle to it. That sat for a while, because we would have done a lot of loops together. Every now and again, I go back through and go 'oh yeah, that's a cool thing, let's build off that'. At the time [it comes down to] whatever is in front of us.

So, with the *Playing Dead* shows, what guitars and basses are you guys using on stage?

TI: I've got my hollow Bolero bass.

SC: I've got an Eastwood remake of an Airline lap steel. It's a H44 standard. I've also got a Cort EVL. You know, the goth-looking acoustic? That was my first proper guitar. Maybe that was a big influence on the kind of subject matter that I was writing back in the day. Matching the energy of the instrument I was using.

I heard that you guys use immersive effects when you're playing live, such as projections of home movies and animations, and samples from video game soundtracks?

SC: That's true. The siren in one of the songs is from the first Silent Hill game.

TI: Carl Sagan has a segment before 'Doomer', saying a little thing.

I also read about you guys using lava lamps and special lighting.

SC: If you don't have somebody doing lighting, or you're not really into the kind of lighting that is standard for gigs these days, you can just bring your own projector or bring your own footage. You can define who's illuminated at what times by what footage and there's a little bit more control to match the flow of the set.

TI: Or how it really helps us to get the audience to feel how we feel. It's a really good way to set the tone of what has inspired us or how we're actually feeling, rather than just playing the music. It's like, step into our world, step into our minds.

Obscura Hail's *Playing Dead* is out now through Dot Dash.

AFTER A SPELL

MORE THAN 50 YEARS AFTER BEING CREDITED AS 'THE WITCH (UNDEAD)' ON THE LABEL OF THEIR DEBUT ALBUM, *INTRODUCTION*, ZAMBIAN 'ZAMROCK' GROUP **WITCH** ARE CURRENTLY ENJOYING A NEW LEASE ON LIFE AS A MULTICULTURAL NINE-PIECE. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR RODE OUR BROOMS TO THE SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE TO TALK WITH WITCH IN PERSON.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON**.

In a fashion similar to one of Africa's 218 volcanoes, the Zambian 'garage-psych-prog-funk-afro-rock ensemble' WITCH erupted in activity in 2012 after lying dormant for nearly 30 years, and later set off on their first world tour. Led by remaining founding members singer-frontman Emmanuel 'Jagari' Chanda and keyboardist Patrick Mwondela, the reformation of the '70s group led to a resurgence in popularity for the genre of zamrock.

Albums released between 1972-1977 started to gain the attention of American and European crate diggers and bootleggers shortly after 2010. For WITCH to regain ownership of their songs, Los Angeles label Now-Again Records contacted Chanda to inquire about a reissue campaign. Thus, the garage-rock grooves of *Introduction* and the fuzzy psychedelia of *Lazy Bones!!* have now gained a renewed popularity, alongside three other albums from their rock period and two albums from their later disco-styled era (1980-1984).

Last year WITCH released *Zango*, their eighth album, after a 39-year gap. The album was recorded onto tape in Zambia by Jagari, Patrick, four new European members and six guest musicians, including Sampa The Great and Keith Kabwe, former lead singer for the zamrock group Amanaz. To capture the authentic zamrock sound of the '70s, a studio team salvaged and utilised some of the same gear that was used to record *Lazy Bones!!*. Australian Guitar interviewed Jagari, Patrick and their Bulgarian guitarist, Stefan Lilov, backstage at the Sydney Opera House, before their first Sydney show on March 4.

Is it a bit of a surprise that people are excited about zamrock again, after all these years?

Jagari Chanda: It is a surprise. Looking at my age I thought, 'oh well, it's finished'. I had started some other things, like gemstone mining.

How did you first hear about WITCH, Stefan?

Stefan Lilov: By listening to music on YouTube. As you click one video, there's WITCH's 'Introduction' that is recommended to you, and the Ngozi Family (another prolific Zamrock group from the '70s). I think, in zamrock, the level of originality in some of the guitar riffs and sounds is crazier than in the studio in Europe. No rules and playing with feeling. Always improvising.

Why is there such a big fan base of WITCH fans in Europe all of a sudden?

JC: As a result of the reissuing of old music from Zambia by Now-Again Records, and then also because of the documentary. We have one guy from [Canada] in the band [Michael Rault, guitar, and a Cuban-Dominican percussionist, Charles Garmendia]. We have Stefan from Bulgaria, two guys from the Netherlands [bassist Jacco Gardner and drummer Nico Mauskoviç], and the tour manager [Gio Arlotta] is from Italy. [Patrick] lives in the UK. He's been there for over 30 years.

Are your backing singers African as well?

JC: [Hanna Tembo and Theresa Ng'ambi] are from Zambia.

Did WITCH start to get together again around 2012, as I heard?

JC: It was around 2010. I got information from a friend of ours who was also a pioneer of zamrock - Rikki Ililonga. He told me about people bootlegging our music in Germany. Then he said, 'there's a guy in the States who wants to normalise the situation, should I give him your contact?' and I said yes. Later I got a phone call from Egon (Eothen "Egon" Alapatt), the founder of Now-Again Records, and in 2012, I was invited to go to Los Angeles. Egon had organised a band for me there. We played at Urban Outfitters in Los Angeles. That was the start.

Going back to the early days, when Zambia gained independence in 1964 and new president Kenneth Kaunda put through the policy -

JC: - It was a decree [made in 1975] that the national radio station should play over 80% local content, meaning all the musicians had an opportunity to record something that would be heard on national radio. But few zamrock bands recorded on vinyl.

Where I grew up, I was surrounded by five other mining towns. Almost everyone worked in the mines, mining copper. We had people from surrounding countries as well. They came to work in the mines and they brought their cultures and traditions, which included different types of music.

When you were in WITCH in the '70s, I heard you liked to play near places where nurses were training because men liked to come to meet the nurses at the shows.

JC: There were annual events like agriculture and mining shows, where people came to display their machines and their produce from farms. There were also music competitions. Every year there was a scramble for people to get WITCH at the trade fairs. Our band had big followings in almost all the towns. I got inspired one time when we opened for Osibisa. That's the first time I heard synth, and the Afrobeat fusion with heavy rock. If you listen to *Lukombo Vibes* [a WITCH album from 1976], there's a lot of influence from Osibisa.

WITCH was going to support Bob Marley at his concert for Zimbabwean independence in 1980, but it didn't happen - why?

Patrick Mwondela: We got a message saying that it was dangerous to travel to Harare at night, because some of the freedom fighters were still out in the bush. It was safer for us to travel during the day, so that's how we missed that show.

What guitars are you using for the rest of the tour, Stefan?

SL: I'm using a Fender Telecaster. American Deluxe.

Do these songs require any odd tunings or is it standard tuning mainly?

SL: It's mainly standard tuning. The rhythms come from Africa, but everything on the guitar comes from Deep Purple, Black Sabbath, and all this kind of stuff.

I heard you sometimes used to use four microphones at one show, Jaggery?

JC: Yes, suppose you are doing an antic and you are five meters from your microphone. What do you do?

Grab another one!

JC: Whatever you find, you use.

Witch's *Zango* is out now through Desert Daze Sound.

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INFERNAL RIFFAGE

SYDNEY METAL HEAVYWEIGHTS **FLAMING WREKAGE** HAVE BEEN BLAZING A TRAIL WITH SPINE-CRACKING THRASH SINCE 2009, AIDED BY THE DEATH METAL VOCALS OF FRONTMAN AND RHYTHM GUITARIST DAVE LUPTON. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR ENTERED THE DARKNESS TO CHAT THEIR NEW LP *TERRA INFERNA*.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON**. PHOTO BY **SANDRA MARKOVIC**.

Looking back over the past fourteen years spent singing and playing rhythm in Flaming Wrekage, Dave Lupton makes the following summation: "From where we started, the difference is huge". Flaming Wrekage was founded at a Sydney high school in 2009 and – evidently not wasting time honing their craft – has since become a theatre-filling, world-touring juggernaut of rage and precision.

The DIY release of their 2010 debut EP *Disaster Zone* provides the starting point for their artistic progression, though the tracks have now been lost to time. After its release, they undertook the writing of their debut 2013 album, *Catharsis*, recorded by Matt Clarke (Lycanthrope, To The Grave). Lupton viewed the recording of the album as a 'massive deal'.

Three quarters of Flaming Wrekage's current line up was solidified on their 2017 sophomore album, *From Flesh To Dust*, and their third album *Cathedral Of Bones* received widespread praise upon its 2021 release for dynamic singles such as 'Running Blind' and 'The Voiceless', enhanced by the production of Orpheus Omega's Chris Themelco, who recently oversaw the making of the group's newest record, *Terra Inferna*, at Monolith Studios.

Flaming Wrekage has now shared stages with Power Trip, Psycroptic, Soilwork and Katatonia. It's a long way to come for Dave Lupton, who began his musical career as a child drumming on chairs to Midnight Oil, before becoming obsessed with Metallica and discovering a gateway to heavier bands. He gave Australian Guitar the current lowdown on Flaming Wrekage from his home in Arncliffe.

What was the writing process for 'Witch Hunt' like?

I think the main verse riff was something that I had lying around. A lot of the time with our band, it's either me or [guitarist Justin] Juzzy [Humphry] who will come up with the main riff. The longer this lineup has played together, it's been more of a process of all four of us really getting involved in the songwriting process. If anyone brings a riff in, we don't try and work on it too much before we bring it to the rest of the band, because it's awesome to flesh out these ideas when we're all in the room. Especially with Matt [Thornton, drummer] and [bassist Lachlan] 'Lachie' [Campbell], they're such a driving rhythm section, so they can introduce more sort structural stuff, different approaches to the grooves, or interesting drum parts that will influence the next bit of the song, guitar-wise. Often, it does just start with one or two riffs. Then, depending on what Matt might add to it, like an interesting kick drum pattern, if you follow that along you can make a riff out of that. 'Witch Hunt' is so relentless all the way through. It was screaming for a shredding guitar solo. We've become more picky with how we use lead stuff now. We don't do solos on every song anymore. I feel like when you start playing at this level, you feel this obligation to have a sick solo in every song, but it's not really the case for us: I think it's just whatever the song needs. There's plenty of stuff on the latest thing that we've been working on that don't have any solos. It's more of a journey - building layers and doing interesting things, but as far as that song goes, it comes in hot and stays hot.

There's an interesting approach to the hi-hat in the verse.

Yeah, that's an example of what I was just alluding to. The riff swaps around a little bit. You have that initial drive and then it goes to the offbeat. Another challenge with our songwriting is that me and Juzzy are pretty novice when it comes to technical terms. It's like, the riff starts here and finishes there, and then Matt or Lach will be like, 'ah, it's in 4/4 for this long, are you going to have a bar there?' I'm like, 'I've got no idea what you're talking about'. That can be a challenge at times, but when Matt can introduce things like that, that makes a song really interesting. Having those little changes keeps the listener engaged.

Were you learning guitar before you started practicing harsh vocals? Or was it vocals first, then guitar?

It was guitar first, for quite a while. I didn't really fancy myself as a singer. Lamb Of God were the band that made me want to get into vocals. When we did our first album, I was like, 'well, who else is gonna do it?'. I just put my hand up. Ever since then I've been writing really hard guitar parts, and trying to figure out how to sing over them. I'm too far in now, [but Lamb Of God's] *Sacrament* and *Wrath* albums were massively influential on me. That was the kind of harsh vocal that I really liked. Lamb Of God and In Flames really influenced me vocally. That was a shift in my listening, because I started out being obsessed with Metallica, and thrash stuff. Then I got this [MTV] Headbanger's Ball mix-disc thing, that had all these bands, like In Flames, Lamb Of God, DevilDriver, Meshuggah, all these bands I'd never heard before. I didn't realise music could be that heavy. Ever since then, I was totally hooked. That really gave you the full spectrum of metal. I connected with so much of it, and I was like, 'this is what I need to do'.

It's a learning journey that will never end, I guess. You can always keep pushing it further and discovering new ways of doing it.

Especially with playing guitar. You will never learn everything. It's such a wild instrument and there's so much music out there. You've just got to try. You're always taking things in, always listening to different influences. You can hear something in a pop song that might pique your interest, which can be used in a way that serves a metal song. Keeping an ear out for that kind of stuff is really interesting. I think that's what makes our band unique, because we all listen to so many different influences. We [didn't all] come from thrash, or maybe we did to begin with, but it's all going in completely different directions when it all comes together. That's what Flaming Wrekage is.

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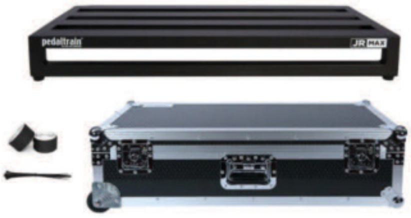

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SKYWARD BOUND

DISTANT DESCENDANT OF LEGENDARY FRONTIERSMAN DAVY CROCKETT, COUNTRY SINGER-SONGWRITER, ARIES - **CHARLEY CROCKETT** WEARS MANY HATS. AUSTRALIAN GUITAR HIGHTAILED IT TO SYDNEY TO CHAT WITH HIM ABOUT HIS NEW LP *$10 COWBOY*.

WORDS BY **CORIN SHEARSTON**. PHOTO BY **LIAM DALEY**.

"One of these mornins, I'm gonna get up outta Texas", sang Charley Crockett. "Don't mean I ain't proud of my home, but young men like me just got to go". Although Crockett recorded these lines in 2014, dropping out of high school with his first guitar at the age of 17 spurred him into an improvised career based on instinct, survival and a love for music. Two decades, twelve albums and over a thousand shows later, Crockett has packed out The Grand Ole Opry, and performed for NPR's Tiny Desk Concert, Jimmy Kimmel and Farm Aid. Last year, he joined a celebrity line up performing at Willie Nelson's 90th birthday celebration, and not long after he and Nelson released a duet in the form of 'That's What Makes the World Go Around'.

The story of that song's main character, pondering her future while having heard about the city, is reminiscent of Crockett's early travels. After busking in Dallas and New Orleans' French Quarter, Crockett made his way to New York City, where he performed rap-tinged RnB and folk songs in the NYC subways with his band The Trainrobbers, before being discovered by a representative of Sony Music.

Born in 1984 as one of three siblings raised by a single mother in a trailer park, who never knew his dad and lost his older sister to an overdose, Crockett's soulful voice sounds deeply heartfelt when he sings about hardship and tragedy. With a maturing vocal style made unique by his short-clipped prairie drawl, Crockett ended up traveling as far as France, Spain and Morocco after first leaving San Benito, Texas, and survived lifesaving open-heart surgery in 2019. Crockett spoke to Australian Guitar in February, backstage at the Enmore Theatre, on the afternoon of his Sydney headline show.

You've covered a wide range of topics in your songs, but do you remember writing your first? You got your first guitar at 17 - was it around then?

Yeah, but I was making up songs when I was much younger than that. I used to just make them up when I was a kid, for fun, when I was a lot younger. The first songs I ever came up with probably weren't very good. I hope nobody ever hears them.

Fair enough.

Actually, I remember a kid I was going to high school with. Everybody I knew had it pretty rough but this kid was having to come up with a lot of his parents' rent money. I remember them bailing on him to go gambling in Las Vegas, leaving this kid in this apartment alone in high school, and they were broke as hell. He was working all the time to help his mum make ends meet and I remember going over to his apartment there. I remember the look on his face, and I wrote a song about him paying the bills while his parents went to Las Vegas. I haven't thought of that in 25 years.

I wanted to talk briefly about Willie Nelson, who you met recently to do the duet-single 'That's What Makes The World Go Around'. Is the photo on the cover your first meeting with Willie?

It was the very first time I ever met him. I talked to him on the phone before that a couple of times. He called me [when I was] in Reno, Nevada. And I remember with my phone ringing, I thought it was my agent FaceTiming me. I've never answered those, but because [I thought] it was my agent, I answered it. But it wasn't him. It was Willie, asking me if I had any time to play shows with him. You always have time for Willie. It had to be a couple years after that, that I met him. I think we were in Woodstock, New York, when I first met him. I never asked the man for a picture. Willie lets you know when he's going to take his picture with you.

How did the Willie in your mind compare to Willie the real man, do you think?

I think it was real similar actually. You know where I'm from, you probably heard more Willie Nelson and ZZ Top, being from South Texas, than almost anybody. Freddy Fender as well. But especially Willie Nelson. ZZ Top. Waylon Jennings. You hear that stuff everywhere, in the jukeboxes, restaurants, from your family, your friends. When he come up the ramp, walking toward me, I said 'you're the red headed stranger', and he goes, 'that's right'. I said, 'I'm the son of Davy'.

There you go. Like your label.

Yeah.

So he lived up to his reputation, basically.

Oh yeah. Absolutely.

When you played at his 90th, you covered his song 'Yesterday's Wine'.

Yesterday's Wine, man. That's one of my favourite Willie Nelson albums.

I love 'Whiskey River', 'Shotgun Willie', 'Me And Paul'. I got into country music through Johnny Cash, then I went to a shop one day, bought a Willie Nelson compilation, and I became a fan of country.

That's kind of the whole thing about country music. People don't get it until one day, they do. I think country music is not about how you say something. It's about having something to say. I mean real country music. I don't mean that bullshit.

I saw footage of you playing in the New York subway, and I heard you played on the streets in New Orleans. When you look back at where your career has gone, are you kind of surprised at all the twists and turns that have happened along the way?

Yeah, sometimes I look back at it and I'm surprised. But I think maybe there was also a part of me, a long time ago, when I was much younger, playing on New Orleans street corners, that knew it was gonna be a really long, hard road. I think, way down, from the bottom of my boot, I knew it.

Let's talk guitars briefly, what guitars have you brought over to Australia this time round?

I've got this old '62 Danelectro Silvertone. I've also got an SL Mosman Dreadnought. It's a pretty rare acoustic, made by this guy, SL Mosman in Winfield, Kansas. I've got several Waterloo acoustics, made by Collings out of Austin, Texas, they're what I travel around with, but I've been playing this SL Mosman more recently, [because], in a bind, I needed another acoustic. This SL Mosman the guy put in my hands and he said, 'I should be trying to sell you a $10,000 guitar, but this one I think is the best player in the group'. I started playing some songs of mine on the guitar, and sure enough, it was the best guitar in the room. At least for me.

Charley Crockett's *$10 Cowboy* is out now.

SUPER FRIENDS UNITE!

A LONG TIME AGO ... TWO LONG ISLAND TEENAGERS NAMED JOE SATRIANI AND STEVE VAI RECORDED A DEMO CALLED "REFLECTIONS ON A YEAR AND A HALF." NOW — MORE THAN 50 AND A HALF YEARS LATER — THESE GUITAR SUPERSTARS ARE FINALLY RETURNING TO THE CONCEPT OF RECORDING ORIGINAL MUSIC TOGETHER, AND THEY'VE EVEN LINED UP A CO-HEADLINING, JUST-THE-TWO-OF-'EM TOUR

WORDS BY RICHARD BIENSTOCK PHOTOS BY JEN ROSENSTEIN

"I OPEN THE DOOR AND THERE'S THIS 12-YEAR-OLD KID, A STRINGLESS GUITAR IN ONE HAND, A PACK OF STRINGS IN THE OTHER"

JOE SATRIANI still remembers the first time he laid eyes on **STEVE VAI**. It was 1972 in Carle Place, Long Island, and at the time, Satriani, then just a teenager, was already known around the neighborhood as a killer guitar player — and maybe an even better guitar teacher.

Which is when Vai came knocking at his front door.

"It was your typical Long Island afternoon," Satriani says. "I open the door and there's this 12-year-old kid, a stringless guitar in one hand, a pack of strings in the other." Suffice it to say, Satriani wasn't immediately impressed. "I really didn't know him," he says of Vai, "although I knew and feared his older siblings. When you'd see them walking down the hallway at Carle Place High School, you just moved to the side. Impressive family, you know?"

Satriani laughs, then continues. "So Steve shows up wanting to play guitar, and I think he knew about me because I had been teaching another local kid, John Sergio, who was Steve's friend. John was a good guy and a really good student, and I probably never would've let Steve in the door had he not said John's name. But I thought, 'Okay, let's see what this is all about...'"

Needless to say, anyone who has picked up a guitar or a guitar magazine — or, for that matter, has had even a nominal interest in guitar-based music — over the past 40 years knows what this story is all about. Today, Joe Satriani and Steve Vai are two undisputed giants of the six- (and seven-) string universe. Their individual lists of accomplishments are too extensive, and by this point well-known, to spend time cataloging here, and it's hardly hyperbole to say that there are few, if any, players in the post-Van Halen world that have been so influential, so successful and so beloved for so long. Throughout the years, Satriani and Vai have remained the closest of friends, as well as each other's biggest supporters and public boosters. They have each pushed not just guitar playing but guitar design into uncharted territories with their various Ibanez signature models (Joe's expansive JS Series; Steve's JEM, Universe and PIA ranges) and have taken similar leaps with their respective pickup collaborations with DiMarzio. They have appeared in multiple issues of Australian Guitar — to put it mildly — and graced stages throughout the world alongside other guitarists on package tours like the long-running, Joe Satriani-conceived G3.

Two things they have not done together? A co-headlining, just-the-two-of-'em tour, and writing and recording original music. But that all changes this year, as the pair have teamed up for the appropriately named Satch-Vai tour, a first-ever outing that sees the guitarists criss-crossing the U.S. for roughly three dozen performances. What's more, in preparation for the run, they've been working on something extra special: brand-new instrumental music that, at the time of *Guitar World*'s interview, they report is close to completion. "It's all right there, on my computer," Vai says, pointing to a workstation behind him in his home studio. Adds Satriani, "We have three pieces that are 90 percent finished. We've both got ridiculous schedules, so we're not even thinking about how impossible it is to get it done. But we'll figure it out."

To be sure, even after all these decades, these two remain fully engaged in their musical pursuits. Satch spent much of last year on the road in support of his 18th solo album, *The Elephants of Mars*, and is deep in woodshedding mode for the Best of All Worlds 2024 summer tour, where he will assume the herculean task of recreating Eddie Van Halen's guitar parts alongside Sammy Hagar, Michael Anthony and Jason Bonham in a celebratory, VH-focused show. As for Vai, he recently wrapped a mammoth globetrotting run for his 2022 studio effort, *Inviolate*, a record and tour that also saw him debut a brand-new, utterly mind-blowing guitar creation, the Hydra, a three-necked monster featuring, among other components: seven- and 12-string guitars; a four-string ¾-scale-length bass; 13 harp strings; single-coil, humbucking, piezo, MIDI and sustainer pickups; half-fretless necks; floating and hardtail bridges and much more. Additionally, this past January, Vai and Satriani, along with Eric Johnson, embarked on a short G3 U.S. tour, reuniting the original trio that headlined the inaugural 1996 run.

Joe Satriani [*left*] and Steve Vai, photographed in Los Angeles, February 12, 2024. "We're having fun and getting it done," Satriani says

Turning his attention to the Satch-Vai tour, Vai says, "I think in the back of our minds someplace, we felt it would've been kind of crazy not to eventually do something like this. Because while we've done G3 over the years, and we've been able to record some things together — a couple of guest spots here and there on various records — it's never been just me and Joe before." As for their new collaborative music, he continues, "I think it's all part of the path. And it just organically came about: 'Hey, since we're doing this tour, what if we fool around with some co-creations?' And I'm very eager for the fans to hear these tracks. I think they're gonna love them."

"We're having fun and getting it done," Satriani adds.

"I'm just so glad it's finally happening," Vai says, then laughs. "Because by this point it's something that has been percolating for, I would say, 55 years."

To celebrate this 55-years-in-the-making moment, Satriani and Vai sat down to discuss their unique companionship and, now, collaboration. Over the course of a wide-ranging interview, the two expounded on their earliest days together, talked about their new tour and music and picked their favorite songs from one another. They also looked at the state of the guitar community today, mused on how players can continue to "explore the infinite" and explained why, if you don't know your guitar notes, you don't know... well, you'll see.

JOE SATRIANI and STEVE VAI discuss the guitars they're holding in six vintage *Guitar World* covers from the past. Along the way, we learn about some guitar thefts, loud photoshoots, hair, pants and flexi-discs...

Our US sibling magazine Guitar World has been covering Vai and Satriani since 1980, long before Australian Guitar broke its first string. As a result, Satch and Vai have appeared on countless issues of that magazine, holding countless different axes, and with wildly different hairstyles.

Here's a look at some choice historical examples, with some details on the guitar featured on each cover.

Interviews:
Richard Bienstock

To state the obvious, you guys have known each other for a minute. But while you've crossed musical paths over the years, this is the first time you've ever done a co-headlining tour or released collaborative music. What led to this moment?

JOE SATRIANI: It goes back to when my son, ZZ [*Satriani's son is an L.A.-based filmmaker*], called me a few years ago about what was then the 25th anniversary of G3, saying he wanted to document it. Everything just sort of snowballed from there. We went into making the documentary, and then getting the idea to do a reunion tour [*of the original 1996 G3 lineup with Satriani, Vai and Eric Johnson*]. And then Steve and I and all of our people started saying, "Hey, we should just keep going." The question was, how do we keep going? And that became, "Let's do some shows... and maybe make some music too, while we can." So that's how it started. Because I think we were pretty deep in our own worlds prior to that. I know that, like me, Steve has production books laying around his desk with millions of ideas, and he's always trying to figure out, "What year do I get to do this project?" We each just keep going in our directions until someone knocks on our shell and says, "Hey, come out and do something with somebody else."

STEVE VAI: Amen to that. And I thought it was perfect

JOE SATRIANI

1. NOVEMBER 1989
Guitar World
Original photographer:
Neil Zlozower

What model guitar are you playing in this photo?

SATRIANI: That's my first Ibanez JS prototype, which we called "Black Dog." It had a Roadstar neck and a basswood 540 Radius body. By the time of this photo it also had a DiMar-

zio FRED pickup in the bridge and a PAF Pro in the neck. [*Luthier*] Gary Brawer had done extensive fret and fretboard work as well.

Why did you bring this particular guitar to the shoot?
I started using it live in '88 and used it all over *Flying in a Blue Dream* and throughout the Nineties. It was one of my favorites to play at that time because it had a very unique feel and tone. Since it was a distressed, plain black guitar, I thought a little artwork would improve the look and give it a cool vibe. It was featured on the back of the *Flying in a Blue Dream* album, so it only seemed right to bring it to the photo session.

Did you use this guitar on any notable recordings?
The first time I recorded with this guitar would have been for "The Crush of Love" on the *Dreaming #11* live/studio EP. The song, recorded and mixed by John Cuniberti, featured Jeff Campitelli on drums, along with my guitar, bass and keyboard work. It was first released on a *Guitar Player* flexi-disc! I really got to know the guitar during the *Flying in a Blue Dream* album sessions in '89, as it was my main guitar for that album.

What do you love about this guitar?
This was the first guitar that I had a chance to mold to fit my ideas of melodic expression. I liked the 540 Radius body concept but made a few changes to make it even more comfortable to hold. The compound fretboard radius was essential to what I was trying to achieve. That took months of trial and error to figure out. The techs at Ibanez, Steve Blucher at DiMarzio and San Francisco luthier Gary Brawer helped me every step of the way. We played with fret size, potentiometer values, high pass filters, pickups, etc. Eventually, this prototype allowed me to play melodies with extreme detail. It responded to even the smallest touch from my fingers.

Do you still own this guitar?
Yes, I do. However, after it was stolen in San Francisco during a short tour with Steve Miller, then purchased back from the thieves, it lost some of its mojo — and its artwork! The thieves rubbed off all the original art

timing, really. Because this all started when we were kids, and it's just been such a nice journey along the way. And Joe's right — we both are very creative in the little secrets we like to manifest. But at this point we've done so much, and we've toured our own music by ourselves to the hilt. So you want to stretch out. You want to do some different things.

Tell us about the new music you've been working on together.
VAI: Well you know, there's many ways to collaborate. I was out on tour for the last year and a half, basically, so it was a little difficult to wrap my brain around writing a song. But I opened my email one day, and there were these two absolutely delicious tracks that Joe

"I WOULD WALK INTO JOE'S ROOM — AND IT WAS THE COOLEST TEENAGE LONG ISLAND BEDROOM EVER"

in an effort to disguise it. I re-illustrated it a few times since then, and it's still in my collection, but I don't play it much these days. I've made further improvements to the JS line that reflect a better functioning of the instrument.

Do you recall anything about this shoot?

Is this me doing my best "Magnum" or "Blue Steel" look? I remember this shoot because of my hair styling, which was more a result of desperation than choice. It was an evening session in Hollywood at Neil Zlozower's studio, where we shot the inside cover for *Flying in a Blue Dream* and *The Extremist*, and countless other photos. Neil is a force of nature; he always pulls something new and iconic out of you during his loud, raucous photo sessions. At one point my hair stopped cooperating and I just brushed it off my forehead, gave this funny look to Neil and he snapped the photo. We all laughed and agreed, "That's the shot!"

2. NOVEMBER 1993

Guitar World

Original photographer:

Michael Sexton

What model guitar are you playing in this photo?

The guitar I'm holding was my favorite Donnie Hunt-illustrated JS named "Blue Donnie." He painted it after I asked him to try using larger characters and fewer colors. Donnie was a wild, inspired artist who painted anything and everything in his environment. He painted a lot of my stage clothes for the first few tours I did as a solo artist.

Why did you bring this guitar to the shoot?

Since I knew the cover concept before the shoot, I thought that Donnie's *Day of the Dead*-inspired artwork would fit right in. It was perfect! Seeing those skeleton figures on the body really helped sell the photo.

had sketched, with quasi-finished parts. And they're just so great. So we went back and forth on various arrangement concepts. Then he sent me the sessions with his solos in them. Oh my goodness. That's a handful, I'll tell you that. It's amazing. Then there's also one track that I kind of put together. Overall, I'll just say that at this age, our true idiosyncrasies are really shining in the music. And I think the fans are going to love these tracks. They're very "Joe and Steve."

Steve, this may be the first time you're releasing music together, but it's not the first time you've recorded any. Supposedly, there's a two-track demo that you cut together as teenagers, after you had been taking lessons from Joe for 18 months. You guys called the recording "Reflections on a Year and a Half."

VAI: [*to Satriani*] Should I talk about that?

SATRIANI: Yeah, yeah, sure. Why not?

VAI: Well, I was taking lessons and I would walk into Joe's room — and it was the coolest teenage Long Island bedroom ever, because it was festooned with huge rock 'n' roll posters and beautiful stacks of vinyl, with Jimi Hendrix's *The Cry of Love* usually at the front. And Joe's Kustom amps — the ones with the kind of packing around the enclosure — and curly cables, which are always fascinating. But he had this two-track reel-to-reel recorder, and that was the first time I was exposed to anything in the world of engineering or recording or capturing music. And Joe explained to me, "Well, you can record something on one track and then overdub on another track..." I mean, that was like heaven in a cup. So in one of my lessons, Joe fired up this reel-to-reel. He had this riff, I had been playing for about a year and a half, and we recorded this thing. Just two kids in a bedroom. And it was a really cool, kind of interesting, hard riff.

SATRIANI: I think that was a Sony two-track I had?

VAI: Yep, it was. Go forward probably 15 years after that, Joe sent me the little reel and he said, "Look what I found." And it was the recording. I transferred it to digital, and it just sat on the shelf for many, many years. Until now. When the idea came to work on new music

CBS VIA GETTY IMAGES (BEN STILLER'S BLUE STEEL)   FUTURE (GW COVERS)

“JOE GOES, ‘STOP. GO HOME. DON’T COME BACK UNTIL YOU KNOW THE NOTES. AND THANK YOU VERY MUCH — I’LL TAKE YOUR MONEY’”

together, one of the tracks that Joe sent me has a part in it that is a chord progression that we used to jam over endlessly when we were kids. We’d go into his backyard and sit back-to-back for four, five, six hours and just play. It was the most amazing, engaging musical experience I can remember. And one of the chord changes we used to play on, Joe incorporated it into one of the new songs. So then I said, “I have this tape. What would happen if I took this and started to build something out of it?” And that original recording is part of the contribution to the song I’m constructing.

SATRIANI: It’s amazing. It absolutely blew my mind. As soon as I heard the riff, I remember telling Steve, “Oh, I remember that!” I was fascinated with the intervals and trying to figure out how to play something like that. And of course, after I heard it again I picked up the guitar and I was like, “*What*?” It’s a really weird riff.

VAI: It’s obtuse. And you know, when I listen to the original tape I still don’t know who’s playing what. But I would assume that Joe’s playing the riff, because I don’t think I was capable of doing anything like that back then. [*Laughs*]

Joe, what was it like having Steve as a student?

SATRIANI: Well, my perspective on it is probably so different from his, as it is with all my students. When they come to me with recollections they remember things very clearly, and I rarely remember what they remember. I tend to remember a musical and a personality profile more than specific moments or individual lessons. But the most important thing I remember about Steve is that there was a connection really early on, on a couple of levels. One that I can’t really put into words, but just feeling really close to somebody that you’re meeting for the first time. The other was a really important lesson to have as a young guitar player — and something you don’t want to really think about when you’re a teenager and dreaming of becoming a rock star — which was having some little kid come in and totally blow you away, where pretty soon you’re going, “Oh, man, this kid’s got more than I’ve got.” [*Laughs*] That’s what it was like with Steve. I mean, I’m

Did you use this guitar on any notable recordings?

Oddly enough, I can’t remember what I used it on in the studio. I started every *Flying in a Blue Dream* tour show with it, and it figured into *The Extremist* and *Time Machine* tours.

What do you love about this guitar?

The guitar looked and played great. It was one of those rock-solid guitars that never seemed to need an adjustment. It had a very balanced tone as well, not wild or hot, just even and balanced.

Do you still own this guitar?

Unfortunately, it is currently stolen. We came back from a short tour in the mid-Nineties only to find it had been nicked from our storage locker at the San Rafael, California, facility that Metallica would ultimately take over. I would really like it returned, please!

Do you recall anything about this shoot?

This cover was fun to shoot, and maybe a bit creepy, too. I was cool with the idea that I was representing the end of “shred,” even though we all knew it wasn’t true. But I’d never had to pose “dead” before! The alternate fold-out “Not!” cover was a fun idea, but if you look at who else is featured in the issue you get a good sense of what was happening at that time. Lead guitarists were taking a lot of flak for being, well, lead guitarists! “Pay no attention to trends and just do what you believe in” — that’s my credo.

STEVE VAI

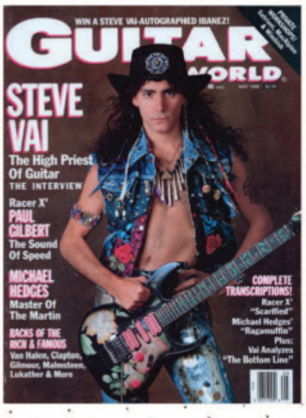
3. MAY 1988
Guitar World
Original photographer:
John Livzey

What model guitar are you playing in this photo?
VAI: A production prototype of the Ibanez Jem77FP. The positioning of the fabric pattern on the body is somewhat unique because Ibanez was still working on the positioning variants for the production guitars. The black area around the pickup selector is indicative of my earliest florals. Bonus note for JEM nerds: it originally had a "wrist rest" installed — like the earliest run of original JEMs — before it was withdrawn due to a patent dispute with Kahler. Pads for the wrist rest are visible either side of the trem.

Why did you bring this guitar to the shoot?
Because it was new. And also because this shoot had a dual purpose as marketing collateral for Ibanez and the launch of the floral JEM, which came out after the initial Loch Ness Green, Shocking Pink and Desert Sun Yellow models.

Did you use this guitar on any notable recordings?
It appears in the [*David Lee Roth*] "Just Like Paradise" video, along with the original Red Heart triple neck. It's unlikely it was used on a recording. A different prototype floral was used on the *Skyscraper* tour [*with Roth*].

What do you love about this guitar?
I have always felt that the floral JEMs are the best-sounding JEMs. Something about the fabric bonded to the body somehow gives the guitars a certain resonance.



still struggling with that riff in "Reflections [on a Year and a Half]." It's not getting any easier!

Steve, you've said that at one of your first lessons with Joe, he actually sent you home.

VAI: Yes. And trust me when I tell you this was probably one of the most powerful, transformative events in my life, because it wasn't just a simple surface-level kind of a suggestion. It went very deep. And Joe probably has no idea how deep. But we have a tendency to create identities for ourselves based on what the world is telling us about ourselves. And when I was young and going to school, I was never very sharp or bright in academics, you know? So I never really felt I had the ability to memorize things. I didn't want to do anything except play the guitar. But I went to this one lesson and Joe said, "Memorize every note on the guitar. And when you come back, you've gotta know it."

It's interesting, because when I was leaving his house, in the back of my mind was this old belief: "You're not gonna do that. You *can't*. You don't have the retention or the intelligence to memorize all those notes and know them immediately." It was a disbelief in myself. So then I went back for my lesson the next week, and I hadn't learned the notes. I sit down, and Joe goes, "Stop. Go home. Don't come back until you know the notes. And thank you very much — I'll take your money." Which is another absolutely necessary thing that I needed to understand. [*Laughs*] And I still remember on my lesson sheet from that day, he wrote, "If you don't know your notes, you don't know sh--!" That's the way he wrote it: S, H, space, space, exclamation point. And then a little picture of a dagger.

SATRIANI: [*Laughs*] The dagger part... I mean, can you imagine if a teacher did that today?

VAI: But like I was saying, that experience was transformative. I remember on the walk home from Joe's house I had an epiphany: "You are never, ever going to step into that house again until you know your lesson so hard." And also, "You can do it. Why do you think you can't? Of *course* you can memorize the notes. As a matter of fact, you're gonna know the notes so cold that you're never going to forget 'em." It was a complete reversal of my perspective of myself. And that flowed into everything that happened in my life afterwards. I know it sounds like a lot, but it was that memorable.

"FANS WILL SEE SOMETHING THAT WASN'T REALLY REPRESENTED AS MUCH IN-DEPTH BEFORE: US PLAYING ORGANIZED, WRITTEN LINES THAT AREN'T JUST SIMPLE MELODIES"

What we've been talking about here is the forming of a deep bond between two musicians. Jumping forward a bit, you recently wrapped a short G3 tour, which recreated the initial lineup from 1996. Joe, when you conceived the G3 idea in the mid-Nineties, it came out of the desire to foster more of those types of bonds within the guitar community, correct?

SATRIANI: Yes. Nowadays we have the internet, we have social media. But the idea behind G3 came from the fact that things were very antisocial, I suppose, in our world. That was my perspective, at least. There was a lot of competition, a lot of back-stabbing, a lot of stupid, old-school entertainment rules that were keeping guitar players away from each other. I noticed that there wasn't any camaraderie at all. And I said, "Well, there should be."

I think that's what Steve and I were thinking about when we were kids playing in my backyard. We thought, "This is gonna be great when we've got a few more of us, and we're all traveling around the world, playing on stages, having a great time showing each other how to play this, that, and the other thing." But it didn't happen that way. We wound up on our separate islands, protected by our labels and managers, and nobody was playing together. Also, I think the styles of rock music that were popular in the early Nineties didn't really help solve that issue at all. So I started to feel like, "Hey, maybe we should formalize something that guitar players feel is a safe, fun place not only for them, but for the audience that loves this stuff. Where we can have fun with the guitar and celebrate it, rather than compete with it." That was really at the heart of G3. And it took some convincing because, you know, the Nineties were the Nineties.

Do you feel that the guitar community is in a better place nowadays?

SATRIANI: Now it's fantastic, because so many players have a venue. As a matter of fact, every player has their own venue. It's a total democracy out there, and it's so easy for players to interact with one another. If you spend 24 hours on social media checking out every

Do you still own this guitar?
No. It's unclear what happened to it. Probably given away — or stolen.

Do you recall anything about this shoot?
It was photographed by John Livzey in Los Angeles and later used by Ibanez as the classic "High Priest of Guitar" poster. Other photos from the shoot appear in the article.

4. JANUARY 1990

Guitar World
Original photographer:
Neil Zlozower

What model guitar are you playing in this photo?
This is the second Ibanez Universe prototype. I named this guitar "Bodhi," and its collection number is SV84. Interestingly, this guitar has "Jem" on the headstock, because this was made before the "Universe" name was decided on. It was taken on the Whitesnake tour as a spare, and at some point my tech, Stan Schiller, covered the guitar in adhesive green dots purchased from Office Depot. The larger dots eventually fell off the body, but smaller dots remain stuck to the pickguard.

Why did you bring this particular guitar to the shoot?
Probably because it was a brand-new guitar at the time of the shoot. Most Whitesnake-era cover photos were this guitar, or the white UV eventually given to Prince.

Did you use this guitar on any notable recordings?
The first prototype seven-string was used on the Whitesnake record. This black Universe seven-string is the second prototype, and I have used

it on virtually every recording I've played a seven-string on throughout my catalog. It's my go-to seven-string.

What do you love about this guitar?
This guitar is my favorite-sounding Universe in my collection. It also has the thinnest neck of all my Universe guitars. It's friendly to play, and just seems to be one of those instruments that came together by the stars.

Do you still own this guitar?
Absolutely, and I still use it.

Do you recall anything about this shoot?
Shot by Neil Zlozower in Hollywood. I wore these pants quite a bit during the *Passion and Warfare* sessions. The shoot also included photos of me and this guitar with a Harley-Davidson chopper.

JOE SATRIANI & STEVE VAI

5. APRIL 1990
Guitar World
Original photographer:
Neil Zlozower

What model guitar are you playing in this photo?
VAI: I'm using one of the first [*Ibanez*] Universe UV77MC multicolor swirl prototypes.
SATRIANI: That's one of two original Ibanez JS chrome guitars. It's probably around the time I had just received them. Eventually I got a third one. The one in the photo would be number one, the one we call Chrome Boy. This was the really

guitar player from every corner of the world, your mind will be blown. And hopefully it won't make you give up. Hopefully you go, "I'm inspired now." Because, really, what the internet is telling us is that everyone is an individual and everyone has something unique to say. So you should take it all as encouragement.
VAI: It's hard for a lot of people to understand what it was like before the internet — even though it's like yesterday to us — but the whole infrastructure of the music business was completely different. You had to spend a lot of money on renting a studio to record. You had to have a label interested in investing in you and releasing your music. You had to have agents that were willing to book you based on promoters taking a chance. These days, you can release your own music. You can build your own story. If you have the wherewithal, you can be completely independent. It's really wonderful the way it's changed. And as a result of that, you've got people who are sitting in their bedrooms motoring away, and then uploading videos and allowing all of us to bear witness to what's possible on the instrument. And that's encouraging and inspiring.

What I would also love to see happen, because there's one aspect that's missing from that, is the personal, intimate connection with another musician in the moment. I would love to see technology evolve to the point where it's as easy to enter that space with somebody else as it is to just sit alone. Because there's a big difference between sitting alone or connecting with somebody. But I think that's on the way.

Here's a "Joe and Steve" question: Do each of you have a favorite song from the other?
SATRIANI: Oh, wow. [*looks at Vai*] What was the first tape that you sent me? What was it called? It was the one that had "Garbage Wrapped in Skin" and all that stuff on there. This is before [*Vai's 1984 debut solo album*] *Flex-Able*. I loved that.
VAI: I had, like, a little bossa nova drum machine that [*Frank*] Zappa gave me, and I didn't know what I was doing. I would just hang a mic

"WE'VE WRITTEN THE MUSIC, WE'RE GETTING IT RECORDED, AND THEN ONCE IT'S RECORDED, WE'LL FIGURE OUT HOW TO PLAY IT"

in front of the [*speaker*] cabinet. I was fascinated with the idea that I could go *woo woo woo woo* and then hear it back. It was nasty stuff.
SATRIANI: You would feel dirty after listening to this stuff! [*Laughs*] But then you'd go, "How crazy is this person to create this soundscape?" It was like stepping into an insane film, you know? It was so inspiring to see Steve get into that space, to be able to create a world. And of course he refined it, and then he made it beautiful. But it's hard to pick just one song. There's "For the Love of God" [*from 1990's* Passion and Warfare], which is such a monumental piece of music. And I'm really into the most recent album [Inviolate], because it's so expansive — in addition to the three-necked beast that he plays on it. When Steve was sending me little video clips of him in the studio playing the Hydra, in my head I could see the little 12-year-old kid sitting in my bedroom taking his lessons. And then I thought, "Yeah, this makes sense. I totally expected this!"

How about you, Steve?
VAI: Oh, there's so many tracks of Joe's that I love. There's a side of me that just loves listening to any-

body play guitar, regardless of the proficiency, and then there's the critical side of me that listens to guitar players with the same ears that listen to, you know, Jeff Beck and Allan Holdsworth. I'm checking out form, intonation and style. But the thing that always resonates with me, no matter what, is inspired melody — melody that comes from a place that's unique and intimate to its creator. And this is Joe's world. He's always been so eloquent in expressing his real musical intentions. I equate him to Tom Waits, in a sense. Tom is just my favorite artist, and it's because he creates these atmospheres, and every element of the atmosphere works within the overall picture. Joe does the same thing. Completely different tools, obviously, but similar outcome.

With that in mind, the song of Joe's that I'll mention is "Cryin' " [*from Satriani's 1992 album,* The Extremist]. Just for the way that melody is so touching. You don't need those Matteo Mancuso-like chops to get the point across, you know? The melody, and the way Joe plays it, it's just sublime. I get lost in it every time I hear it.

Turning our attention back to the upcoming Satch-Vai tour, what can fans expect to see that they haven't seen before from you two?

SATRIANI: Well, for starters, we're going to be performing original music together, which is something we haven't really figured out as far as the staging part of it. But, you know, if we build it, it will come. And that's kind of like the way I'm looking at it. We've written the music, we're getting it recorded, and then once it's recorded, we'll figure out how to play it. Then once we know how to play it, we'll figure out where it goes in the show, and so on and so forth. But I never worry about those details beforehand. Because then you wouldn't do anything.

As far as the staging goes, I envision Joe's bedroom circa 1972 — the posters, the *Cry of Love* vinyl, all of it.

VAI: That's right! Do the whole thing

early days of the JS model, and so we were still toying with the kind of wood we were using, the pickups, everything was changing really fast. And it was also only the second time, I think, that I was out touring as a solo artist. So I was really coming to grips with how to do an instrumental guitar show and what kind of gear I needed for it.

Why did you bring this particular guitar to the shoot?

SATRIANI: This was really my first attempt to figure out how to chrome a wood-body guitar. And there were issues with it. With one of them, we couldn't stop the chrome from buckling up off the wood. It was a really big problem, because it was dangerous. You rubbed your skin against it, it would just rip your hand open. But I had this guitar, and Ibanez wanted me to play it so I could give them feedback.

VAI: It was new and eye-catching. Many promo images for [*Vai's 1990 album*] *Passion and Warfare* featured this guitar. The guitar has faded considerably since the shoot.

Did you use this guitar on any notable recordings?

VAI: It was used here and there on *Passion and Warfare*, and it appears on the album's cover with the handle airbrushed out. And the reason the one on the cover doesn't have the handle was because we were going to offer it as a production model, and the production model didn't have the handle. So we took it out of the photo. The guitar also appears in Whitesnake's "Fool for Your Loving" music video.

SATRIANI: I've used Chrome Boy continually. I toured with it for a very long time. It was maybe after [2001's] *Live in San Francisco* that I stopped. I think the second chrome guitar, the one I called Pearly Gates, because it had Pearly Gates pickups in it, was stolen right around that time. And so I decided to not bring out the Chrome Boy anymore. It became the home guitar at that point.

What do you love about this guitar?

SATRIANI: It looked really cool, and I was very excited about it.

VAI: It was bold and colorful, and launched the Ibanez Universe seven-

string into the public's conscious-ness.

Do you still own this guitar?
SATRIANI: Yes, absolutely.
VAI: No. I gifted it to [*pre-teen guitar prodigy*] Thomas McRocklin in 1990, as a thank-you for his appearance in the video for "The Audience Is Listening."

What do you recall about this shoot?
SATRIANI: It was the *Flying in a Blue Dream* period for me, and *Passion and Warfare* for Steve. So it was perfect timing for us.
VAI: Shot by Neil Zlozower at his studio in Hollywood.
SATRIANI: When I'm looking at that cover, in my head I can hear Neil yelling at me, "Satriani, why'd you bring that damn chrome guitar? That thing's gonna screw up my lens!" [*Laughs*]

6. OCTOBER 2007
Guitar World
Original photographer:
Travis Shinn

What model guitar are you playing in this photo?
VAI: "Shapes," the first Ibanez JEM equipped with True Temperament frets, received in 2007.
SATRIANI: That's the JS1200. I had a red '66 Fender Electric XII, and I took a picture of it and sent it to Ibanez. I said, "Can we get some-thing that's like that, but a little different, a little updated?"

Why did you bring this particu-lar guitar to the shoot?
VAI: Like many photo shoots, I brought one of the newest and most interesting guitars that recent-ly arrived at my studio.

— us sitting back-to-back, using curly cables and Kustom amps.
SATRIANI: I'll have to get a wig...
VAI: [*Laughs*] But the new music is one of the things I'm looking so forward to. Because I think the fans will see something that wasn't really represented as much in-depth before, and that's us playing organized, written lines that aren't just simple melodies. I mean, there's some simple melodies, of course, but really, we're going to have to sharpen our teeth on playing these beautiful tapestries together. And that's different from, say, G3. The G3 shows are fantastic, but they're more about the communicative back and forth. This is more like our DNA fused together.

Since those days in Joe's Carle Place bedroom you've both accom-plished so much in your respec-tive careers. And as we're seeing now, you're still trying new things. Where does that desire to continue exploring with your instrument and your music come from?
VAI: I think it's built into us by universal design — to want to achieve, to want to explore, to want to expand. The creative impulse in humans is very power-ful, and it has a momentum to it. I know that for me, that has never gone away. I used to create lists and lists of projects I wanted to do, and I remember when I turned 50, I looked at this list and I realized there were maybe 150 projects on it. And each one of them takes two years, you know? And I was like, "Okay..." I realized that as long as I'm enjoying what I'm doing in the now, then all will be well. So that's what I continue to do.

And that's also keeping in mind that, through time, there's changes. Especially with elite athletes, virtuoso musicians, what have you, there's certain limitations. I know I've experienced some physical things over the years. But still, within any parameter you can ex-plore the infinite. Even if you have one finger, it's all there. So with that attitude, I've learned to adjust, but go deeper. That's always been my goal, and it continues to be.

"IT'S HARD FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IT WAS LIKE BEFORE THE INTERNET — EVEN THOUGH IT'S LIKE YESTERDAY TO US"

How about you, Joe?
SATRIANI: I maybe noticed my physical limitations quite early on. [*Laughs*] But one thing I really took to heart was what I learned from Bill Westcott, our mutual mu-sic theory teacher at Carle Place High School. Bill was the one who said to me, "You know, when you're 18, 19, it may turn out you're not really very gifted, physically,

on the instrument. But it doesn't mean that your brain can't keep developing until you're 80 years old." He said, "That's what you should be training — the musician up here [*points to his head*]. Then your hands will follow." That's really hard for a teenager to understand, because at that time in your life it's all body, you know? It's just hormones and flesh and blood. And then someone says, "No, don't pay attention to your body — think!" [*Laughs*] It took a while, but I realized Bill was so right-on with that.
VAI: Bill was totally brilliant. So much of what I learned about music theory was fed by Bill, but at the time I wasn't applying it to the guitar. Joe was taking the same class from the same teacher, and he was able to apply this musical information to his instrument.
SATRIANI: What I discovered through that was that composing was the thing I liked the most. As much as I liked playing, I *really* liked writing music. I was intrigued with harmony. I was dead-set on turning it upside down, and playing chord progressions that no one had thought of, and breaking the rules of, you know, 18th-century counterpoint and everything else. But that wasn't going to come from my fingertips or what size pick I was using. It was going to come from how my brain was going to interpret my feelings about what I wanted to express musically. That's a really long game to play. To embark on that journey of composing is the longest game ever. Because it keeps going. And as Steve said, it may turn out you've just got one finger left, but you can still write the greatest thing ever. So that's been my focus right from the beginning. The rest of it is just fun. And also annoying, because I'm 67 now and I still play arpeggios exactly the same way now as I did when I was 17. There's been zero progress. Zero!
VAI: Oh, I don't know about that. [*Laughs*] You should hear *you* through *my* ears.

SATRIANI: The 1200 would have been kind of new at that time, too. But it's not unusual for me to bring two or three guitars. I would usually bring a white one, a black one and a red one, because you never know what looks the best.

Did you use this guitar on any notable recordings?
VAI: I don't recall. In some ways it was a proof of concept for further guitars that would receive True Temperament necks, including both EVO and FLO [*two of Vai's Ibanez JEM models*] for a time. I took this guitar with me to road-test on the 2007 *Sound Theories* tour.
SATRIANI: It would have been probably around [*2010's*] *Black Swans and Wormhole Wizards*, that period, when I was using this guitar. And I used it live extensively. But the guitar had 22 frets, and eventually I went up to 24. So 2010 would have been when I stopped using it as a tour guitar because of that. I had too many songs that needed 24 frets. Because if you put 24 frets on a guitar, you're gonna use 'em.
VAI: Guitar players are like that. You give them 10 pedals, they'll step on all of 'em eventually!

What do you love about this guitar?
VAI: Improved tuning all over the neck!
SATRIANI: It had the [*DiMarzio*] PAF Joe pickup in the neck position, which allowed me to do more melody and solo playing in the neck position when I had a lot of distortion. Because I found that most pickups there got a little boomy. Which was okay for an eight-bar solo or when you played clean. But increasingly my gig got stranger and stranger — I just played melody/solo, melody/solo for, like, three hours a night. So we started to think about, well, what pickup would service that better?

Do you still own this guitar?
VAI: Yes.
SATRIANI: I do. I think it may be the only 1200 I have.

Do you recall anything about this shoot?
SATRIANI: I remember people started saying I looked like Voldemort. [*Laughs*]

Words Jenna Scaramanga
Portrait Kimberley Ross

"WE LIKE HEAVY SOUNDS ON GUITAR!"

Alt-rock trailblazers **Sleater-Kinney** were making bass-less records long before The White Stripes and The Black Keys came along. As co-leader Carrie Brownstein says: "The power comes from the conversation that the two guitars are having with each other..."

Formed amid the '90s riot grrrl movement, Sleater-Kinney's seminal early records were rage-fuelled and explosive. New effort *Little Rope* is barely less explosive but primarily fuelled by a different emotion: grief. Sleater-Kinney were midway through the songwriting process when Carrie Brownstein learned from the American embassy that her mother and stepfather had been killed in a car accident while holidaying in Italy. On this new album, Carrie and fellow guitarist/vocalist Corin Tucker manifest all the feelings of loss in sounds that range from thundering to delicate. 30 years into their career, Corin's monumental voice is more than equal to the task, and both guitarists wrestle their Gibsons into tones both caustic and vulnerable.

For some, grieving is a process of disappearing into yourself, but for Carrie, *Little Rope* is exactly the opposite. "We just wanted to make something that felt extroverted, that felt lively, and that felt like it was going to be a container for these big emotions and sounds," she says. "Usually our favourite records are something that's going to bring people in and create an environment where there's restlessness and urgency. Whether it was guitar tones or tempo, I think everything just had this energy to it."

HIGH VOLTAGE
Carrie Brownstein: "I just like how the tone is darker on an SG."

Little Rope carries off the feat of being melodic and aggressive at the same time, thanks to the interplay between Corin and Carrie's guitar tones. "We were just getting tones that were really crunchy to layer underneath prettier tones," Carrie explains. "Two pedals that we really toyed with a lot were the Expandora [fuzz] and the Jangle Box [compressor]. I used a lot of chorus. I like putting a little harmoniser on things, or phase, but I like stacking that over something that is very corrosive.

"It's like at the core of the song is just this vibrational distortion that's kind of breaking apart," she continues. "I feel like that kind of creates like an ambient world for the song. It still has clarity that you can still hear the notes. It's not just blown out, but it's atmospheric, I guess, and immersive. And then on top of that, you can really stack melody and have that contrast. So much of this album is about that contrast between something that's very harmonious and pretty, and then something that's kind of dark and edgy. I think we were trying to build that tonally as well."

Despite the diversity of tones on show, Sleater-Kinney have not yet been tempted to the dark side of digital modelling. "I've messed around with modellers but I really like hearing a speaker," Carrie shrugs.

Corin and Carrie both rely on Fender amps as clean pedal platforms to build their tones. Corin recorded *Little Rope* with a Fender Showman head that was stolen just after she finished tracking, while Carrie prefers her 65 Deluxe Reverb reissue combo. "I think we also used a Super Reverb and a couple other things in the studio," Carrie says. "But I love the Deluxe Reverb. I actually don't use a ton of reverb on it, but I just think it's a great amp. It handles effects really well and it lets the guitar do most of the talking. Fender's really good at that. There's just a nice purity to it but it's warm. And it doesn't squeeze anything. I like having enough headroom where you can really express the highs and lows and not get too bogged down by too much midrange. It's a good dynamic amp."

Guitar-wise, however, the Fender loyalty ends. Corin's current favourite squeeze is a P-90 Les Paul gold top that was a 50th birthday present from Brownstein. Carrie's favourite Gibson, meanwhile, is an opinion divider: "I mostly went back and played my 1972 SG on this album. Yes, it is from the controversial Norlin era. Some people say that's the years when Gibson got pretty inconsistent. I think that's true, but there are definitely Gibsons from that era that still sound great. I have an SG Special as well. I played a couple of different ones on this album. I just ike how the tone is darker on an SG."

The pair sometimes get extra mileage from layering humbuckers with the P-90 tones of Carrie's Special or Corin's goldtop. "They have different kinds of sustain. The tones just fit together nicely," Carrie summarises neatly. "I think when we're both still in the Gibson world, we just like the density of it. It's dark and thick, and to me it's just heavy. We like heavy sounds on guitar, and I like to be able to get that just from the guitar. Yes, I love pedals, but I do like the warm, heavy tone of a Gibson, no matter the pickup. I guess every once in a while they have something that's a little brighter, but for the most part Gibson is the dark arts of guitar."

While The White Stripes and The Black Keys are often credited with popularising the rock band without a bassist, Sleater-Kinney were making bassless records before those bands were known to even the most dedicated hipsters. Carrie is modest about their role in developing that idea, though.

NEW ORDER
Carrie, left, and Corin. "We came from a scene that really deconstructed the notion of what a conventional band looked like."

"We came from a scene that really deconstructed the notion of what a conventional band looked like. In Olympia, Washington in the 1990s there were so many avant-garde configurations of bands. There were bands that were just bass and drums. There were one guitar and a drummer, or just two guitarists. It was so common in this Pacific Northwest scene to not have a bass or to only have a bass that it didn't feel conspicuous or even notable."

To compensate for that lack of low-end, Sleater-Kinney tune to C# standard, and they also construct their guitar lines to work on their own. "It's the combination of amp, guitar tone, and the detuning, I think naturally sort of conjured the low end. If not in a literal sense, it kind of evoked low end," Carrie explains with the satisfaction that comes from having created something distinctive.

"It's something we honed more and became more deliberate about, once we realised we weren't just going to be putting out two records. But it just worked. We weren't overly concerned about the ways that it didn't conform to what a 'normal' band sounded like. The power didn't come from low end. The power came from the way our guitars sounded together, from the sheer velocity of the songs. The power came from Corin's vocals, and from the conversation that the two guitars were having with each other."

Many traditional rock albums are built from the ground up, with drums and bass going down first, so the guitar tone has to fit around that foundation. For Sleater-Kinney, it's the reverse. "I wouldn't say bass is an afterthought, but the bass tone has to conform to the guitar," Carrie observes. "The building blocks of our band is two guitars with Corin sometimes playing something more akin to a bassline, but often not. We don't adhere to a specific rule in that way. If we're adding bass to a song in the studio, often we're dealing with sub bass that's just really there as the low end rumble so it's not stepping on Corin's guitar line."

Carrie builds her parts to sit on top of Corin's foundation. "I'm the 'lead guitarist' in Sleater-Kinney, but I'm not a shredder," she comments. "You can trick yourself as a guitar player into thinking that virtuosity means playing really, really quickly. I think it's more about what you're saying than how much you're saying. Some of the best guitar lines are one-note leads or three-note leads. If they are perfectly placed, it doesn't matter. I think it's really important to just get away from this idea that you have to be garrulous with your playing." Instead, Carrie looks for unusual partial chord shapes to create interesting harmony. "I just love inverting things. I just add a weird suspended note, or something kind of minor or discordant. I often will start somewhere traditional, and then just reverse or invert it. Then it just has an edge to it. It just gives it a character. I think I'm always looking for character in notes or riffs, especially something that moves it into a place that's a little more ineffable, a little more exciting."

For Sleater-Kinney, pressing against the limitations of their guitar-only format has forced them to find an individual sound. "I think having that kind of restriction placed upon you forces you to think about tone in a different way, to think about low end, to write differently," Carrie says. "If you're emulating something, you think, 'We need all these ingredients, and that will add up to something that has force.' But we found our force somewhere else. We weren't looking for a certain frequency. We were creating the frequency out of what was available to us. A lot of bands that have a unique sound create their own core."

"Finding the in-between with guitar, I think, is part of the charm," she muses. "There's so many options for shaping notes, for shaping chords. I love not quite knowing what someone's playing on guitar. Like, if I'm listening to someone else's song, thinking, 'That seems like this note, but they're doing something different with it.' That, to me, is why guitar so wonderful, so expressive. It emulates the human voice and human emotions so well. And I think of it like the ways that every time we speak, or every time we cry, every time we laugh as humans has a different characteristic to it. I like thinking of the guitar like that, too. That's why it's my favourite instrument and I think just approaching it with that humanity and that openness can make for some really creative, innovative play."

***Little Rope* is out now.**

"GUITAR IS SO WONDERFUL, SO EXPRESSIVE. IT EMULATES THE HUMAN VOICE AND HUMAN EMOTIONS SO WELL"

GRETSCH

REALITY BITES

Packed with hits like "Spoonman," "Fell on Black Days" and "Black Hole Sun," *Superunknown* made Soundgarden the reigning kings of grunge. Thirty years on, **Kim Thayil** recalls, "It didn't budge the meter from everything sucking."

BY JOE BOSSO

KARJEAN LEVINE/GETTY IMAGES

BIG THINGS WERE expected of Soundgarden back in 1989. The Seattle-based hard-rock quartet consisting of guitarist-singer Chris Cornell, lead guitarist Kim Thayil, bassist Hiro Yamamoto and drummer Matt Cameron were already being cited as pioneers of a new sound called "grunge," one that blended the aesthetics of heavy metal, punk and alternative rock. After releasing the EPs *Screaming Life* and *Fopp* on the Sub Pop label, and a debut album, *Ultramega OK*, on SST, the band had signed a major-label deal with A&M Records.

But commercial success didn't come quickly or easily for Soundgarden. Their first album for A&M, 1989's *Louder Than Love*, earned glowing reviews, and college radio stations jumped on hard-driving tracks like "Loud Love" and "Hands All Over." But the record stalled at number 108 on *Billboard*, and by the time the band released their next album, 1991's *Badmotorfinger*, one of their fellow Seattle bands, Alice in Chains, had gone Platinum with *Facelift*. Meanwhile, two other groups from the area, Nirvana and Pearl Jam, dropped two albums — *Nevermind* and *Ten*, respectively — that exploded on the charts. The grunge revolution was now in full bloom, but Soundgarden were still awaiting their day in the sun.

"It did make you go, 'Hey, wait a minute!' " Thayil recalls. "You think, We've been doing all this work, we're touring Europe and the U.S. in vans, and then somebody else releases their first record and they're in a bus and getting a nicer payday. You think that initially — these guys got signed and their record is Platinum — but then you think, Well, we opened doors for ourselves and our friends, but at the same time they also opened doors for us. We were getting attention, and our audience was growing slowly. There were other bands that never had that kind of success. I'm thinking of Mudhoney, Tad and the Screaming Trees — great critical acclaim and great press, but they never had the sales."

But Soundgarden's day was coming, thanks to *Badmotorfinger*. With new bassist Ben Shepherd

added to the band's ambitious songwriting team, Soundgarden's unique blend of walloping riffs and widescreen hooks, combined with unorthodox guitar tunings and arty psychedelia, had resulted in a record packed with cuts like "Outshined," "Rusty Cage" and "Jesus Christ Pose" that ultimately won over rock and alternative radio — and perhaps more importantly, MTV. Over the course of two years, the album sold more than a million copies (by 1996 it was certified double Platinum), and as the band toured relentlessly (at times opening for Guns N' Roses), the stage was set for their grandest adventure: the 1994 monster, *Superunknown*.

Everything that was great about Soundgarden — the band's dynamic and intuitive interplay, Thayil's snaggle-toothed riffs and scalding solos, Cornell's transcendent vocals (sensuous crooning one moment, epic roars the next), and the group's rapidly maturing songcraft (which balanced far-out experimentation with sharp, pop-minded sensibilities) — came together spectacularly on *Superunknown*.

Co-produced by the band and Michael Beinhorn, who had previously helmed hits for the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Soul Asylum, the record was a major leap forward on all levels. Throughout its 15 tracks, the group channeled influences like the Beatles and Led Zeppelin without sacrificing punk-rock urgency or their own distinctive sound. Pummeling grinders like "4th of July," "Limo Wreck" and "Mailman" enthralled existing fans, while a fleet of turbulent, hook-filled singles — "Spoonman," "My Wave," "Fell on Black Days," "The Day I Tried to Love" and the album's across-the-board smash, "Black Hole Sun" — brought in scores of new converts. Immediately hailed as a masterpiece upon its release on March 8, 1994, *Superunknown* debuted at number one on the *Billboard* 200 album chart and went on to sell more than six million copies.

Thayil remembers being on a press tour in England when he and his bandmates first heard that *Superunknown* would hit number one. "We were in an elevator, and our manager, Susan Silver, gave us the news," he says. "We kind of looked at each other and smiled, but we didn't fully understand what it meant. We were happy, but there were no streamers or party poppers or champagne flowing. It didn't impact us the way it should have."

Consuming Thayil's thoughts was the recent breakup of a longtime personal relationship. "We'd been together for 10 years, and it hit a point where, in spite of work over the next few months to try to retrieve and maintain the relationship, it was done," he recalls. Making matters worse, soon after, he — along with others in the tight-knit Seattle community — would be rocked by Kurt Cobain's suicide just one month after *Superunknown*'s release.

"My personal life and things involving our colleagues and peers hit their nadir," Thayil recalls, "but our professional life was at its zenith with the record hitting number one and being on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. I know the success should have meant something, but it didn't budge the meter from everything sucking. I wish we could have had the experience at another time."

Sadly, *Superunknown* would be Soundgarden's high point. Its follow-up, 1996's *Down on the Upside*, wasn't as successful, and the group broke up in 1997 due to internal tensions.

But today, 30 years later, Thayil looks back at *Superunknown* and calls it "easily among our three best albums," alongside *Badmotorfinger* and *Screaming Life*. "I also have no problem with people who say it's our best album. I particularly like *Superunknown*, not because of its success and songs like 'Black Hole Sun' or 'Spoonman,' but because of its ambience and its feel. It's got everything a rock band should bring to an album, namely songwriting

Kim Thayil (left) and Chris Cornell pose for a portrait in New York City, December 1, 1993, shortly after the completion of *Superunknown*.

KARJEAN LEVINE/GETTY IMAGES

(from left) Cornell, Thayil, Ben Shepherd and Matt Cameron. During the making of *Superunknown*, Thayil says, "Everybody, even Matt, brought in guitars for us to play around with."

ROSS HALFIN

and performances. It's not a dance record on which the producer means something. It's not a record from the '60s where you find some singer to actualize the songs you've written on piano and you find an arranger to throw other instruments in. This is a rock band, and all the work is done by the rock band."

"I SAID TO THE GUYS, 'METALLICA'S MANAGER EXPECTS IT TO BE HUGE.' A LOT OF PEOPLE KNEW IT COULD BE BIG"

***Superunknown* is poppier and more radio friendly than the band's previous albums. Was that by design? Did you guys have discussions in which you said, "We've gone this far. How can we reach the next level?"**
Never. We didn't treat it like a video game, like, "We've knocked off all the baddies. Let's get to the next level and find the main boss." We knew that growth and ascension would occur by being true to ourselves and liking what we were doing.

It's how we treated our live shows: If we like what we're doing and there's 50 people out there, the next time we come through town there will be 60 people there. We had no idea it might be a few hundred people, but we weren't aiming for that. We liked what we did, we liked our fans, and our fans liked what we did and wanted to watch us grow. Our standard of satisfaction was based on that.

Did you make elaborate demos of any of the material?
Chris made some. He brought us "Black Hole Sun" with everything but the guitar solos. I modified a few chords to make them suspended or seventh to add a shimmer or brightness here or there, along with the guitar solos and incidental noises — what we call "color parts" to augment the ambience Michael Beinhorn created.

I give credit to Michael for helping us define the room that the album existed in, but there was also the guy who mixed it, Brendan O'Brien, who probably got those elements in there, as well; and Jason Corsaro, the chief engineer — he was designing a lot of the mic setups and dialing in those sounds. At one point, we were talking a co-production credit for everyone, like, Soundgarden, Beinhorn, Jason Corsaro.

Without mentioning names, did the band talk to other producers before going with Michael Beinhorn?
We did talk to others. The record label liked the choice [*of Michael Beinhorn*]. They gave us a list of his records, and we thought, Wow, look at some of the people he's worked with. The bands he worked with reached out and were like, "No, no, no!" [*laughs*] They said, "Yes, he can help you make a great record,

Soundgarden pose outside Tokyo's Roppongi Prince Hotel, February 8, 1994.

but his process is going to cause friction and difficulty within the band." We were told this by almost everybody we spoke to who had worked with him: "This is going to be problematic." Of course, we were like, "We're us, not you." We always had this kind of arrogance. We thought we were strong personalities and weren't going to be easily bowed.

I should clarify, I'm talking about the process, not Michael Beinhorn the person. Off the clock, I got along great with him. We'd drink overpriced Scotch and joke about books and literature. We got along great with the engineers, Jason Corsaro and Adam Kasper. But the actual process made this one of the more difficult records we had worked on. I'm not the only one who experienced frustrations.

What exactly were those frustrations? Were they from the amount of time you spent recording?
There's no single point of contention, but yes, the time-consuming aspects put a stress on our playing or on our ears. You get a certain degree of fatigue from having to listen to the same thing over and over again, or by having to play the same part over and over again for a matter of hours. And it's not as if things will always get better the more you play them; if anything, they'll get worse because of fatigue and lack of focus.

Sometimes that repetition wasn't to elicit a particular performance, but rather it was to dial in a sound. That's a ridiculous thing to do. You can record the performance and then dial it in from there or whatever. Meanwhile, you're wasting time and causing fatigue. That said, it's a great record, but it probably could have been made without that kind of conflict and friction.

Did Chris play more guitar on *Superunknown* than on previous albums?

"THE 'BLACK HOLE SUN' ARPEGGIOS WERE LIKE LITTLE FAIRIES DANCING ON THE HEAD OF A PIN. I THOUGHT, THIS IS NOT ME..."

No. There's some quote Beinhorn made to that effect, but no. There's songs that Chris didn't play on, but there's no song that I didn't play on. On "Black Hole Sun," I played the solos, the color parts and the chorus, but I didn't play on the verse.

Why was that?
What I remember is the arpeggios. Now, I love playing arpeggios when you have delay or chorus on them, maybe some sustain or distortion. We would double them with high stringing from a 12-string guitar. [*Producer*] Terry Date introduced us to that on *Louder Than Love*.

But the "Black Hole Sun" arpeggios were stylistically unusual for me. I've described it as sounding like the right side of a piano, or little fairies dancing on the head of a pin like ballerinas. It was very delicate, and I thought, This is not me. Chris said, "You're good at arpeggios. Go ahead and do it."

I'd start to do it, but halfway through I'd fuck up. I was like, "All right, punch me in." But they said they couldn't punch me in because I was going through a Leslie cabinet. You can't punch in if the speaker is rotating because it's always going to be in a different position. So it was like, "Kim, you have to play the whole thing straight through or else the difference in the sweep will be noticeable."

Every time I tried it, I would fuck up. I looked at Chris and Beinhorn and said, "Can't we add the Leslie in later?" Well, we couldn't do that, and it started psyching me out. I'd get two-thirds through and be like, "Argh!" Finally, I told Chris, "You wrote the part — you track it!" I thought he would do it better than me. He started tracking it, and I went out in the lobby and had some tea. After 20 minutes, I went back in and looked at Chris. He shook his head and said, "Let's try it again." In the end, he was less likely to be psyched out than me. He did the part, and I was like, "Whew! I'll play on the next part."

Your solo on the song is fantastic — very aggressive and unpredictable.
Thank you. It was punched in. [*laughs*] We partly composed that way. I learned that many of my heroes did that. You play a solo and go, "Take two has some better stuff going on than take one. Can we edit it?" It's called "comping."

KOH HASEBE/SHINKO MUSIC/GETTY IMAGES (BAND); TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES (THAYIL)

Were solos your exclusive domain, or did Chris sometimes hint at what he wanted?
On demos, he might have put in a reference thing, or he'd say if he had an idea for delay. There were cases where he'd put a particular effect on, but he'd say, "You can play whatever you want. It's just for reference." He never pushed that. He couldn't play lead because there were physical limitations. He had injured his wrist — I think he broke it as a kid — so he couldn't play fast leads. But we could do twin leads. Like in the early days, on the song "Little Joe" — toward the end we're both soloing. The fast funky thing is me, and the bending, droney thing is Chris.

I liked to double-track solos. Without listening to the first one, I'd play another one blind. You'd get this serendipitous enjoyment when they matched up, and then this weird, insane chaos psychedelia when they didn't.

Just to clarify, you didn't do demos of the songs you brought in?
I just brought in songs or riffs. I'd go, "Here's a part, here's the B part." I committed things to memory in the early days, or I'd have a little cassette. I didn't want to interfere with the whole process by spending time pushing buttons and hitting rewind or whatever. I was like, I'll remember this. We're practicing in a couple days, so I'll just bring these things in.

Did Ben and Matt operate the same way?
It varied. Ben would bring in riffs, but sometimes he'd record a riff, and sometimes he'd four-track something and bring in a demo. Matt would do the same thing. Chris liked bringing in demos because he liked to put the song's best foot forward. I think he thought that if he brought in a riff and I didn't like it, then the song wouldn't happen. But if he brought in the demo with the drums and the vocal ideas, then it was a better presentation of the song and it was more likely to be understood by the rest of us. It makes sense.

You referred to *Superunknown* as being poppier, and that's because Chris, as a singer, wrote songs that were always a little more popular. There's something I felt since I was kid, and it was true of Aerosmith: There are Joe Perry riffs, and there are Steven Tyler riffs, which always seemed to be more vocal friendly. Chris wrote songs that were often going to be more radio friendly. We could have cool metal riffs or crazy art metal, and we could have a song that was strong and poppy and radio friendly. It would be stupid to exclude a song because it was likable. For instance, a song like "Slaves and Bulldozers" might not appeal to radio programmers, but it sure sounds like Soundgarden. "Fell on Black Days" does both.

I was going to mention "Fell on Black Days." There's a little instrumental break that has an almost Middle Eastern or Indian flavor to it.
That's part of the song that Chris wrote. It's funny because that was an important part of our identity in the early days, being primarily an Asian band, that Eastern influence and psychedelia, which the Beatles had. Chris loved the Beatles. I love the Beatles. Matt, Hiro and Ben — we were all influenced by them. That Eastern thing is present in the Beatles via George Harrison, but it's also present in Zeppelin. All of us wrote that way at some point or another. It was present in all of us, and it probably came from the Beatles and Zeppelin, and maybe the fact that I'm Indian.

You mentioned psychedelia. Parts of "My Wave" and "Head Down" have that kind of spacey feel. When you guys were recording, would you reference terms like "psychedelic"?

Thayil performs onstage with Soundgarden at the San Jose State Event Center, June 3, 1994.

We all would to various degrees. I'd say, "Whoa, that part sounds like the Butthole Surfers, or Zeppelin. That totally sounds like Killing Joke." And they'd say, "Yeah, it does sound like Killing Joke." Sometimes I would refer to a shape or color, and Ben would laugh. I communicated that way. Usually it was out of enthusiasm when a part was being developed through jamming or we were shown a part in a demo. We'd go, "That part sounds like a purple circle." It made people laugh, but they would get why it felt or sounded that way to us.

Even while comping solos, were there any lead breaks on *Superunknown* that gave you any real trouble? Were some solos tough nuts to crack?

"Black Hole Sun" was a tough one, because the song had a particular dynamic. It's very delicate in the verses. Like I said, it's very crystal and fragile. I can be heavy-handed with some things, but approaching that verse, which is sort of like Ann Wilson's voice — very crystal and perfect — I couldn't imagine doing something that would break that up. During the choruses, things get bigger and heavier, and they're psychedelic. The Leslie cabinet is still there, but it's set to a different speed for the chorus parts, so when the solo comes up, I thought, Do I maintain this regard for the rotating motion of the cabinet and the delicacy of the verse? I re-addressed that.

The part Chris wrote for the solo section was heavier, so I thought, If I get heavy and chaotic, it will be a dynamic contrast to the verse, and that could be good. But if it loses the identity of the song, that'll be bad. So it was difficult. I first tried playing psychedelic and more delicate. I tried writing a part that was more musical. It wasn't happening and it didn't come together, and in the end I felt like I was constraining myself.

"IT'S A GREAT RECORD, BUT IT PROBABLY COULD HAVE BEEN MADE WITHOUT THAT KIND OF CONFLICT AND FRICTION"

The unhinged solo you did play fit the song beautifully. The same can be said of the solo on "4th of July" — it's gnashing and nasty.

That's a song that Chris wrote. I wrote the solo, which is different from the other ways I solo. A lot of times I improvise, but in this case I actually wrote the part because it felt right. The song already had this foreboding doom because of the tuning. [*see page* 52]

Your Guild S-100 Polara was a big part of your sound on the album.

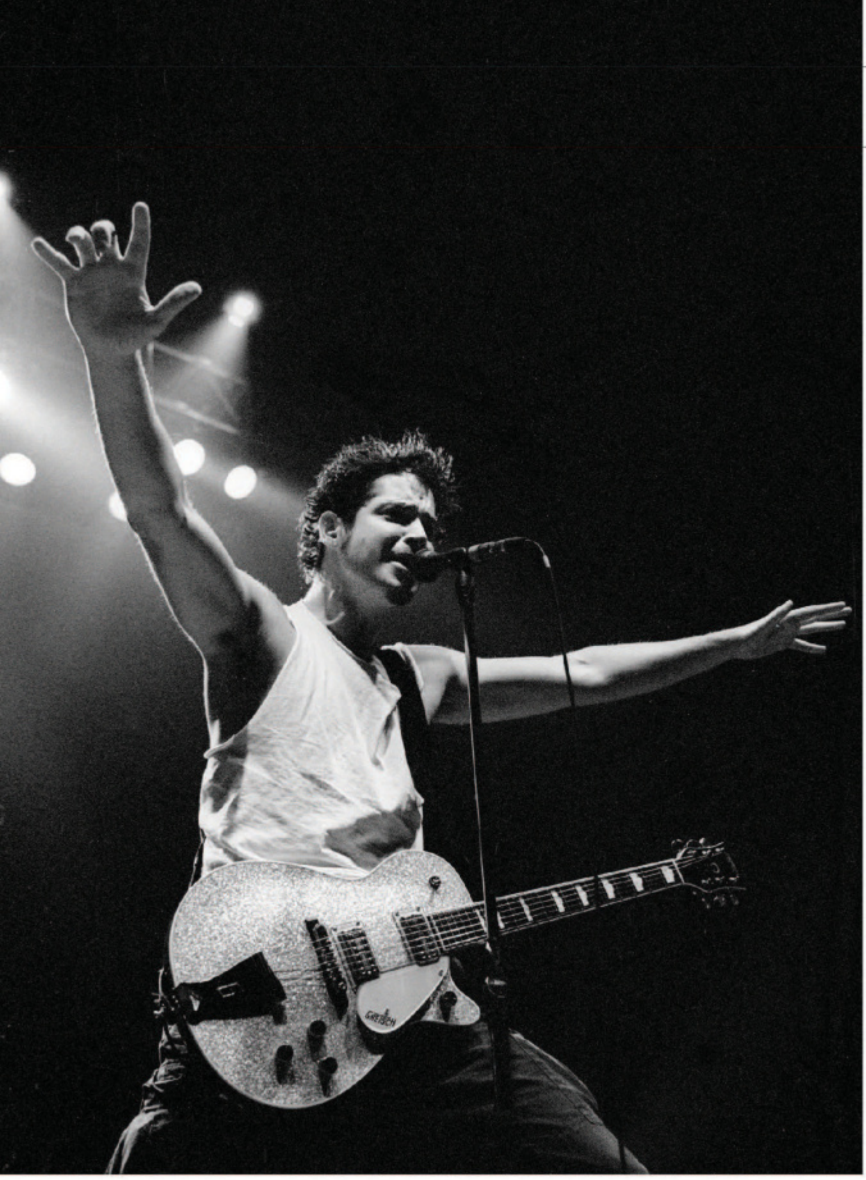
There were a couple of Guilds. I like them. This brings up an interesting thing about the process on *Superunknown*: Michael Beinhorn isn't a guitarist; he's a keyboardist, so in recording he's really oriented toward sounds and tones as an engineer, rather than as a guitarist. If you're trying to extract the best performance from the guitarist, that guitarist should be playing a guitar he feels comfortable with and dialing in a sound that he feels comfortable with, and then the producer and recording engineer works with that.

You did try out other guitars on the record, though. A Tele and a Strat, right?

I used Telecasters more on *Down on the Upside*. I may have tried one a little bit on *Superunknown*, and I might've tried a Strat. If I use a Telecaster, it doesn't feel the same as the Guild, and it doesn't stay in tune. If you remember, we're using a lot of weird guitar tunings here. The Guild has stock Grover

"We didn't want to sound the same," Thayil says. "If he was using a Jazzmaster or a brighter-sounding guitar, it made sense for me to go to a warmer tone."

KARJEAN LEVINE/GETTY IMAGES



ABOVE LEFT: Cornell performs at Vredenburg, Utrecht, in the Netherlands, with the Gretsch 1989 Jet Silver Sparkle guitar he used while recording "Black Hole Sun," April 6, 1994.

ABOVE RIGHT: Thayil in the mid-1990s. *Superunknown*'s success, he says, "didn't impact us the way it should have."

PAUL BERGEN/REDFERNS (CORNELL); ROSS HALFIN (THAYIL)

tuners, so if we're tuning to something weird, or drop D or drop G, or if you're playing a song for six minutes, you're less likely to be out of tune with the Guild than with a Telecaster. Even Les Pauls would get knocked out of tune. For the odd tunings we were using, it was the best bet that we'd get the results we wanted with the Guild.

Chris used a few guitars: a Gretsch Duo Jet and a Silver Jet, along with a Fender Jazzmaster.
Yeah, the Jazzmaster. I'm wondering whose guitar that was, if that was something Ben brought in. Everybody, even Matt, brought in guitars for us to play around with. Chris was more likely to experiment with different guitars for the sake of tone, as opposed to fingers or playing. Remember, he was our first drummer. He was oriented with playing in time and then developed his engineer ears from recording on a four-track at home with Hiro.

He and I didn't want to sound the same, and we had different playing styles. If he was using a Jazzmaster or a brighter-sounding guitar, it made sense for me to go to a warmer tone. If he did a warmer tone and tracked first, then I had to experiment with a brighter tone, which was not my inclination for the feel of a guitar. Oddly, when I would do solos, I preferred the neck pickup, the warmer pickup. But if the bed of the rhythm guitar was already warm, then your guitar has to cut through, so you go to the bridge.

What kind of amps did you guys use on the album?
Mesa/Boogies, perhaps. We used Peavey VTMs through *Badmotorfinger*, and we might have brought them in initially on *Superunknown* and moved on from there. I know I experimented with some Fenders, but we started using Mesa/Boogies and toured with an endorsement. There was so much playing around with fucking tones and sounds that I lost track of what amp I was using.

We talked a bit about hitting the top of the charts. But was the band prepared for the rush of mainstream success?
Like I said, to some degree we were proud and a little bit surprised, but we were doing the work, and with each record we were getting bigger; ascending. We had no reason to believe this would not be the case here. Plus, I had spoken to Cliff Burnstein, one of Metallica's managers, a year prior, at a Metallica show. He took me aside and showed me some charts about Metallica's growth in record sales. He had some other bands on there, including us, and he showed me the pattern of our growth. He said, "I just want to tell you you're sitting really nice. If you make a great next album, if you make the album of your life, it's going to go through the roof."

I remembered that at practice. I said to the guys, "Metallica's manager expects our next record to be huge." I think some of the producers we were talking to knew that too, because there were a lot of

DOWN ON THE LOW SIDE

Kim Thayil reveals *Superunknown*'s unusual dropped guitar tunings.

SOUNDGARDEN HAD DRAWN attention for their use of alternate tunings prior to the release of 1994's *Superunknown*. But the album saw the group take the practice to new extremes.

"We started doing these bizarre things on *Badmotorfinger* when Ben introduced some open tunings and slide tunings," Kim Thayil explains. "Then Chris did that ridiculous tuning on 'Mind Riot,' where he tuned every string to E. That came from a comment by [*Pearl Jam bassist*] Jeff Ament — it was sort of a joke or a challenge, but Chris tried to see what would happen. It was brilliant. We continued that on *Superunknown*."

We asked Thayil to reveal some of the more unusual tunings used on *Superunknown*. He was glad to share them and to clear up a few well-entrenched errors.

Which of you came up with the alternate tunings?
That usually came from the person who came up with the main riff. Initially, our stuff was in standard tuning, and then I introduced drop D and that became our standard. For *Superunknown*, "Limo Wreck" might have had the most interesting tuning on the record: C G D G B E.

"My Wave" and "The Day I Tried to Live" are in E E B B B B flat. Is that correct?
No, that's not right. For those, the last string would be E, so it's E E B B B E. I've seen that incorrect online so many times. A lot of the tunings on the internet are wrong. It's incredible.

Glad we can clear these things up. What about the songs "Head Down" and "Half"? Do they use C G C G G E?
That's correct. "Like Suicide" had an interesting tuning — D G D G B C. Chris wrote that. It's basically the same tuning as "Birth Ritual," but when Chris was playing the arpeggiated part, he couldn't get to the note he wanted on the high string, so he dropped the E down to C and left it open.

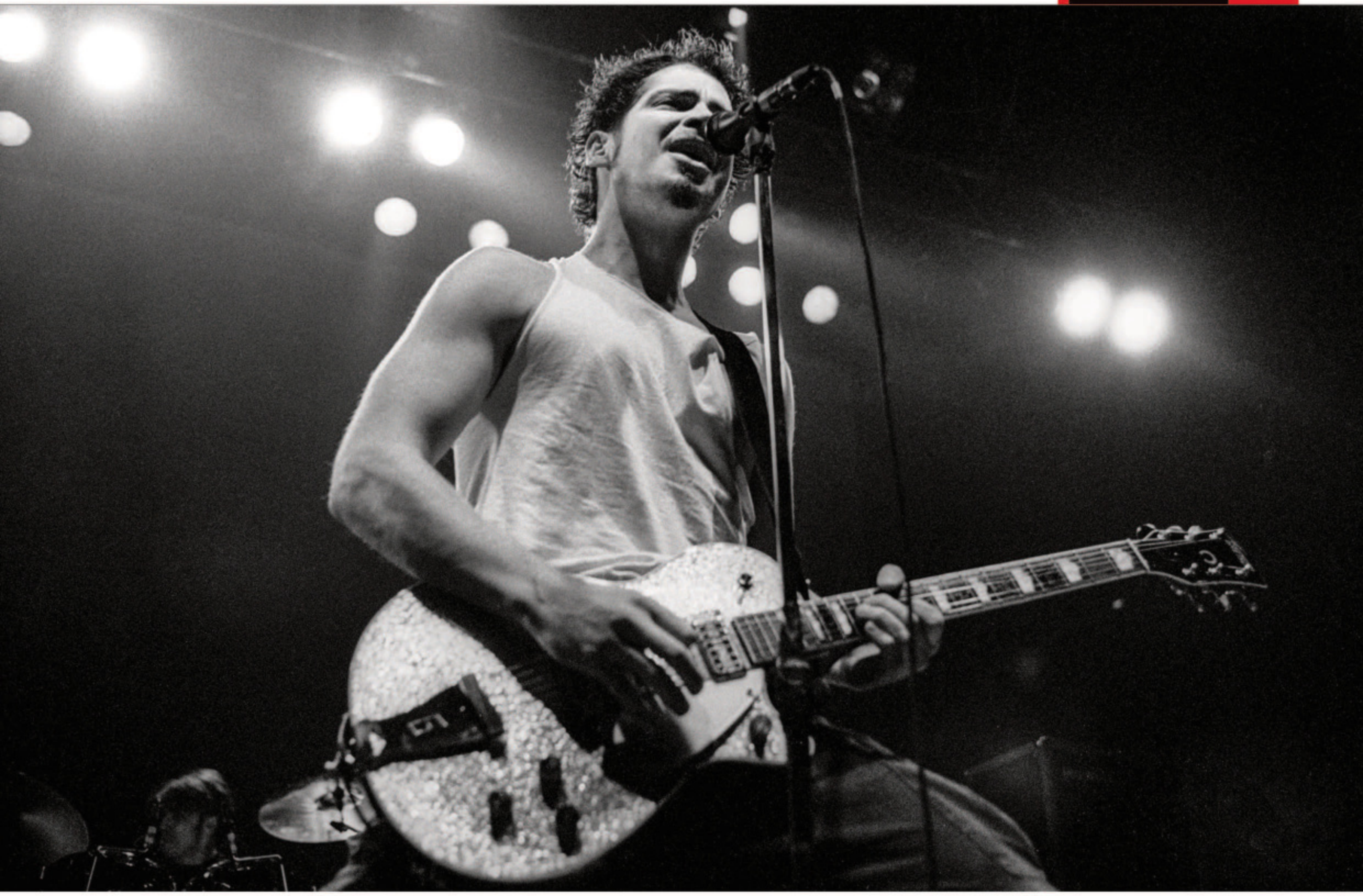
> **"IF YOU CHANGE TUNING, IT AFFECTS HOW YOU PLAY A RIFF OR MELODY"**

You know, if you change the tuning of your guitar, it affects how you play a certain riff or melody. It also affects how you might even strum. I mean, you're not going to hit the guitar too hard if every string is tuned to E because you start breaking strings.

How about the song "4th of July"?
That's a tuning we only used once — C F C G B E. It was pretty crazy and hard to keep in tune. In order to play it live, we had to have a separate guitar that was set with heavier low strings and normal or lighter high strings.

I imagine you guys drove your guitar techs crazy with the various tunings.
I think they liked the challenge. It kept them on their toes. — *JB*

ROSS HALFIN



ABOVE: "Chris stopped hesitating and second-guessing himself," Thayil explains. "He just threw it out there. And then it was like... wow."

BELOW: The cover for *Superunknown*. Known as the Screaming Elf, it's a distorted image of Cornell shot by Kevin Westenberg above a black-and-white, upside-down photo of a burning forest.

PAUL BERGEN/REDFERNS

people soliciting us, and they knew it could be big. But I think it could have happened whether we made another album with Terry Date or recorded with Michael Beinhorn or recorded with Jack Endino, as long as we made a good-sounding record and we had the songs, and we had the four guys writing.

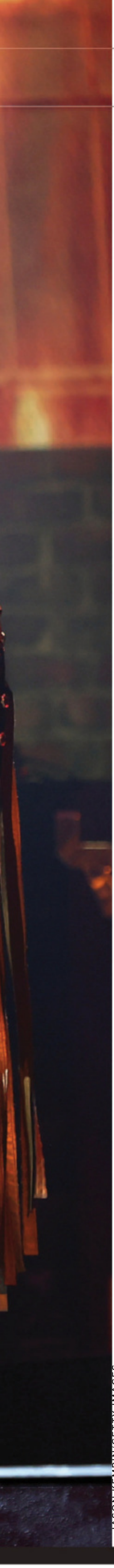
Chris hit his stride around *Badmotorfinger* and [*his side project*] Temple of the Dog, and he became really prolific. I think it's precisely because he lost — we all lost — a good friend in Andy Wood from Mother Love Bone. [*Wood was Mother Love Bone's lead singer and an influential Seattle musician. Cornell conceived Temple of the Dog as a tribute to him, recruiting former Mother Love Bone guitarist Stone Gossard and bassist Jeff Ament, both of whom went on to form Pearl Jam, as well as future Pearl Jam vocalist Eddie Vedder*.] Chris had a lot of regard and love for him. Andy's thing was, "Don't worry if your band doesn't like it. Don't worry if you don't like it.

"FOR THE ODD TUNINGS WE WERE USING, WE'D GET THE RESULTS WE WANTED WITH THE GUILD"

Just record it. There'll be other songs. Just keep writing." Chris started doing that, and he got really good. He stopped hesitating and second-guessing himself. He just threw it out there. As that went on, he started getting better at putting things together, either by not hesitating or by gaining experiences and insights, or a combination of the two. And then it was like… wow.

You're giving Chris high praise for his growth, but I imagine if he were here, he'd say the same about you.
I don't think the rest of us took that insight from Andy as readily as Chris. He told me how blown away he was by Andy's attitude. Chris was very self-critical. I am, too. So is Hiro. There are songs Hiro wrote that are on our albums that were championed by me, or they were championed by Chris. Hiro gave up on them. But here was Andy going, "What the fuck?" Chris was enamored of that. He gave me that advice, but it was hard for me to embrace, not having the full understanding and love of the friendship of Andy Wood. I understood it intellectually, but Chris had a reverence and an emotional embrace to honor that kind of legacy and tradition.

Judas Priest's Richie Faulkner [*left*] and Rob Halford perform in Nashville, March 23, 2022



BRITISH STEEL

JUDAS PRIEST'S RICHIE FAULKNER, ROB HALFORD AND GLENN TIPTON DISCUSS THE INS AND OUTS OF *INVINCIBLE SHIELD*, A BOLD NEW ALBUM THAT LASHES OUT AT HUMAN FRAILTY

AS THEY PREPARE for the release of their 19th album, *Invincible Shield*, Judas Priest are still pondering the randomness of life and the frailty of the human condition. Since the release of their 2018's blowtorch-to-the-face record, *Firepower*, most of the guys in the band have been anything but invincible. Vocalist Rob Halford has battled and seems to have beaten prostate cancer; guitarist Glenn Tipton continues to struggle with a debilitating case of Parkinson's disease, which six years ago ended his ability to tour. And lead guitarist Richie Faulkner vividly remembers suffering an aortic aneurysm on September 26, 2021, while Priest were playing the Louder Than Life festival in Louisville, Kentucky.

"It's crazy to think I easily could have died then and there," says Faulkner, who assumed pole position for the writing and recording of *Invincible Shield* and worked closely with Tipton to voice guitar ideas the guitar hero can no longer play. "If the hospital wasn't so close to the venue and they didn't have one of the leading heart surgery teams in the country, I definitely wouldn't have made it."

Faulkner's survival and rapid recovery has been nothing short of miraculous, even with the intensive follow-up procedures he underwent and the continued precautions he has to undertake. "Overall, my chest and everything is all fine," Faulkner says. "I had to go back in again in 2022 to have another open-heart procedure,

JASON KEMPIN/GETTY IMAGES

BY JON WIEDERHORN

JUDAS PRIEST: TRACK BY TRACK

Richie Faulkner walks us through *Invincible Shield*

"PANIC ATTACK"

"It's the fastest song on the record, and it's a bulldozer. There are synth drums, and then it goes into a classic, fast, Priest-style verse, which has heaviness, speed and melody from Rob. The vocal melody is great and there are some progressive bits that are in 7/8. There's also a nice, long guitar solo in there, and a solo at the end as well. And there are guitar harmonies there, so it's got everything I would associate with Priest other than a clean guitar part."

"THE SERPENT AND THE KING"

"It's a real challenge to play that bloody song. Again, it's one of those songs that took on an intense vibe. Rob is doing that shrieking, banshee type of alpha voice he's famous for. So, anything else you come up with to embellish the song has got to match that intensity. Some of the guitar parts are really heavy, and they come crashing in. It's fun to play and it will be interesting to see what we can do with it live — if I can get the parts down properly."

but that's all fine and cleared up. One of the only side effects now is I have to play a bit more regularly. I'm not a young man anymore. I can't leave the guitar for two weeks and then come back and be right up to speed. I have to stay on top of my playing, and some of that is a result of what happened. But as far as heart damage and the aorta stuff around it, it's all fixed. And everything is kept at bay with medication. So, you never know what's around the corner, but hopefully I'm okay now."

From the opening riff of the fast, urgent album opener "Panic Attack" to the pounding, riff-saturated "Giants in the Sky," a reference to deceased metal pioneers Ronnie James Dio and Lemmy Kilmister, *Invincible Shield* is a burst of energy, perseverance and defiance. Reminiscent of Judas Priest's classic Eighties albums *Screaming for Vengeance* and *Defenders of the Faith*, but with the contemporary production of *Firepower*, the new album is all volume, aggression and sonic acrobatics, ranging from the triumphant melodies of "Crown of Horns" to the barreling, full-blown and rhythmically complex "The Serpent and the King." While *Invincible Shield* is a powerful celebration of pure metal, it's also a relentless, brazen middle finger to mortality and severe illness.

"Sometimes, mortality brings out the best in people," says Halford, who was diagnosed with prostate cancer during the pandemic, underwent a prostatectomy and radiation therapy and has been cancer-free for two years. "That kind of struggle with mortality is all over this record because the instinct to survive is something you channel into yourself as a person, and the things you've been through and witnessed come across in your music. These songs are on fire. They're absolutely blazing because no matter what we're up against, the Priest will never curl up into a ball. We're kicking and screaming, horns up and legs out — metal boots stomping all over the place."

During separate revealing Zoom interviews with Faulkner and Halford, and an e-mail exchange with Tipton, the songwriting trio of Judas Priest addressed the obstacles they faced forging *Invincible Shield*, the way they had to modify their creative process, how their undying support for one another has brought them closer, and Faulkner's constant battle to evolve as a player and composer and his unwillingness to settle for anything short of topping his last great achievement.

Where do you see *Invincible Shield* in relation to the rest of the band's catalog?

RICHIE FAULKNER: People keep comparing this to other things we've done, and I understand their desire to do that, but I think *Invincible Shield* is very much Priest today. That classic sound is ingrained in everyone, including me, but we always try to do something a little bit different than what we've done before. And that doesn't come from some *need* to do something different, it comes naturally. I think creative people naturally try to do things that are new and inspiring to them. As a musician, you have to scratch that creative itch and do stuff that satisfies you.

ROB HALFORD: This is probably one of the most definitive Priest metal albums we've done. I think it's a reflection of where we're at now, and a continuation from where we were with *Firepower* while making references to other places in Priest's history.

Richie, how do you see *Invincible Shield* as a development of your contributions to the band?

FAULKNER: As a guitar player, I'm always thinking of how I can make what I'm doing better than what I did the last time. I focus a lot on how I can make what I wrote more appropriate and more valuable as a musical statement. So maybe I'll construct the solos before recording them. That's something different for me.

Is that what you did for *Invincible Shield*?

FAULKNER: I constructed a few of my leads early and brought them into the studio. That gave me a foundation to work from. I still did about 70 percent of my solos in the studio, but what I did was run through one that's improvised, and then run through another I wrote. After a couple takes, there are motifs that become prominent, and that's what I build the whole solo around.

You've established yourself as the lead guitarist for Judas Priest without altering the band's core sound.

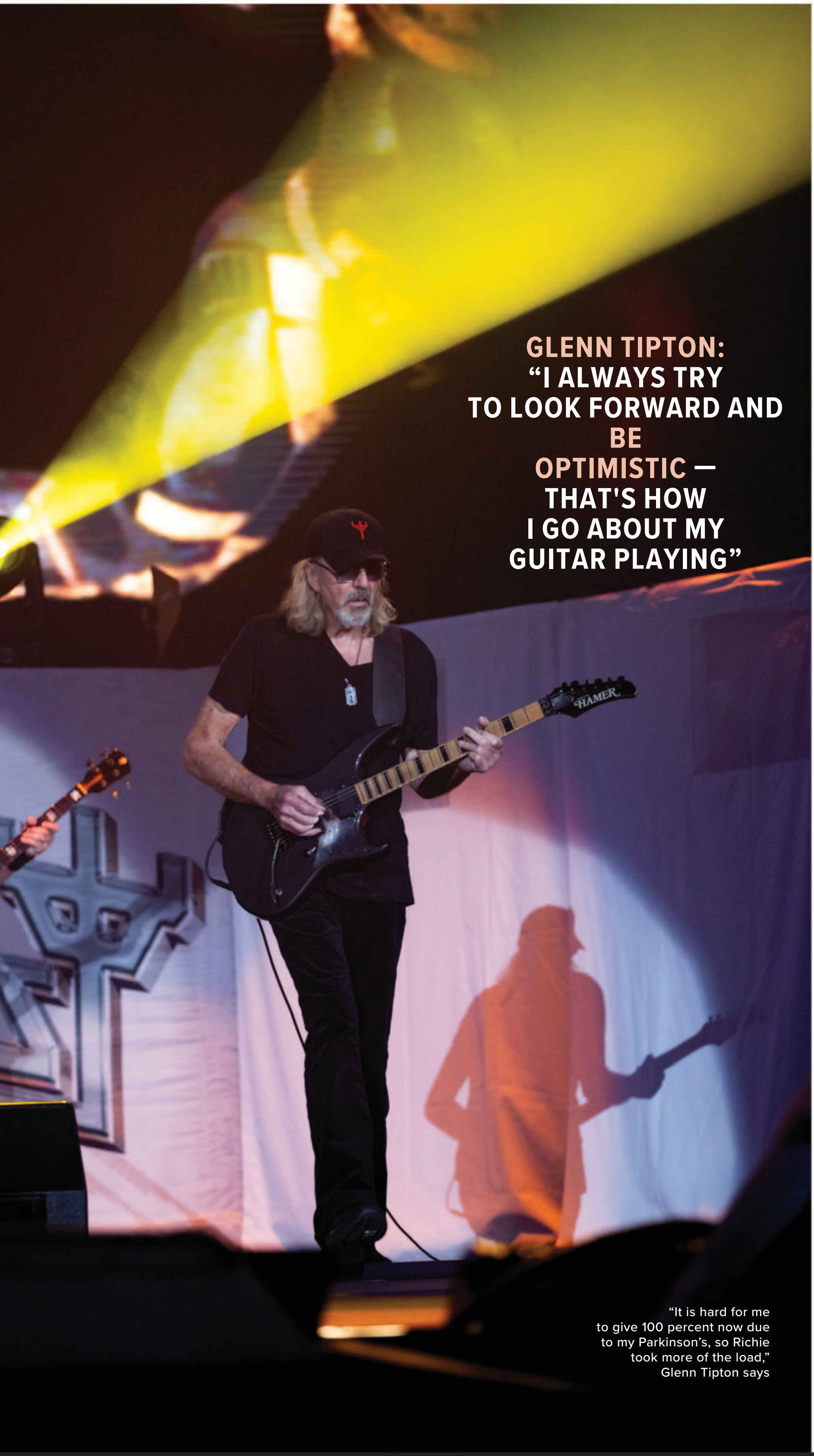
FAULKNER: After 13 years in Priest playing both Glenn's and K.K. [*Downing, former Priest guitarist*]'s stuff, everything they've done has become a part of my style as well. On a very intimate level, I'm playing the "Painkiller" solo every night, so that's become a part of my vocabulary. So, I'm doing things like sweep picking and some tapping, which is new for me.

Did you want to write differently than you have in the past?

FAULKNER: I've always been attracted to slightly progressive elements, and I think we're all into that, so I introduced some parts that were a bit unconventional in that sense this time. And if they didn't tick the right boxes, we left them on the shelf and found something else that worked better. But a lot of those parts stayed in, which was exciting. Maybe they were a little more progressive, maybe they weren't. The only rule was that it had to sound like Judas Priest, and that left a lot of room to explore.

Did you feel more comfortable writing with the guys on *Invincible Shield* than you did on *Firepower*?

FAULKNER: It was just a little differ-



GLENN TIPTON: "I ALWAYS TRY TO LOOK FORWARD AND BE OPTIMISTIC — THAT'S HOW I GO ABOUT MY GUITAR PLAYING"

"It is hard for me to give 100 percent now due to my Parkinson's, so Richie took more of the load," Glenn Tipton says

"IT WILL BE INTERESTING TO SEE WHAT WE CAN DO WITH IT LIVE — IF I CAN GET THE PARTS DOWN PROPERLY"

"INVINCIBLE SHIELD"

"I think it's the longest track on the record. There are a lot of parts to it because sometimes when you're writing stuff, you put down your ideas, and if you have four or five ideas that come to you at once, sometimes they work well together. You might think it's one riff after the other, but we always make sure everything fits together. You can make three songs out of those kinds of things, but for this one, we just made one song out of all those riffs, and it worked. It's a little bit progressive, with all the twists and turns and the different parts. The solo is inspired by Randy Rhoads, and that's a challenge to play as well."

"DEVIL IN DISGUISE"

"That came from an idea Rob had about a Sweeney Todd character in Birmingham. I think they called him Percy the Poisoner. We thought Percy the Poisoner was a silly name for a song, so we changed it. The groove is very much like 'Killing Machine,' so it's an upper mid-paced kind of song that is both melodic and heavy. For the guitars, I was playing a real Ritchie Blackmore-style groove, and as I was playing it, things started to click. It became evident it would work really well for the song. It's not really fast or technical, but there are a lot of bends. And sometimes that stuff is more difficult to play than the fast stuff. You've got to capture the right vibe of the bends and the feel of the solo and make it interesting without being overly flashy. I think I did that, so that's one of my favorite solos on the record."

"GATES OF HELL"

"I've been kicking this around for a while. The intro is very similar to a solo I played on 'You've Got Another Thing Coming.' It's the

JAMES HODGE PHOTOGRAPHY

same kind of register, but I changed it around to make it something different. It's a bit more hard rock than some of the other songs, but when you play with Priest you have that license to explore those things because there's been those elements before in the past. Someone told me it sounds a bit more Eighties. I don't know if that's true, but I love Priest stuff from the Eighties like *Hell Bent for Leather* and *British Steel*."

"CROWN OF HORNS"

"I think this is probably the most melodic track on the record, akin to 'Worth Fighting For' from [*2005's*] *Angel of Retribution* or 'Never the Heroes' [*from 2018's* Firepower] — that type of mid-paced melodic anthem. There are some great melodies in the middle eight, and the way the intro starts is the way the lead solo starts as well, so it has this motif that recurs. It's a little different for me because it's got a bit of tapping, which I didn't really do before."

"AS GOD IS MY WITNESS"

"I sent a demo of this to Andy Sneap. He said, 'Ah, this one has got to go on the album because it's a fast one.' The working title for it was 'Shitlord.' I don't know why; maybe I'll use that name in the future. But I remember Andy saying, 'Yeah, we've got to do Shitlord!' which was pretty funny. That's one of the songs I wrote the solo for before we went into the studio. It's fast and there are lots of quick riffs played with alternate picking. I did all kinds of stuff on the solo, from strong melodies to fast runs, and even some tapping. It's full-on and it's a joy to play."

"TRIAL BY FIRE"

"We wrote it during the *Firepower* sessions, but we never quite got it right. There was something about it that didn't work. We needed to put it away and return to it. This time, we figured out a way to make the song work. All we needed to do was work on it a little bit and make it flow better. I love the way the drums fit around the riff."

"ESCAPE FROM REALITY"

"That was one of Glenn's ideas that he worked on for a while. He wrote

ent. I went in thinking, "Okay, you've got a bit of history with the band now. You co-wrote two records with them. How can you make this one better?" I know better is a nebulous term, but for me, it's *got* to be better. I'm representing one of the biggest and most influential heavy metal bands in the world, and the bar is higher. But that's nothing new. What's different, obviously, is Glenn's situation is different now than it was for the first two albums I did with Priest. I knew I was going to have to take on more of the guitar load.

Did you work more with Rob than you did before?

FAULKNER: We did a lot together. Rob and I would put ideas together in the studio. Rob would usually come in with a vocal idea and I'd find something that worked with it on guitar. At first, you might not know what you've got, but a little way into the creative process, the album takes on its own character. And once you recognize that character, you start to embellish it. At the end, hopefully you've got this monster that you can unleash on the world. It's exciting. It's scary, though.

What was scary about making *Invincible Shield*?

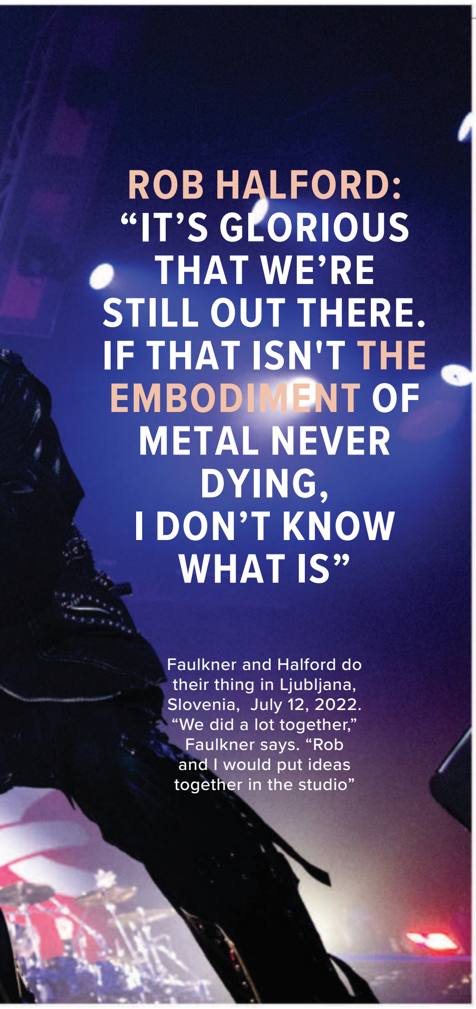
FAULKNER: *Firepower* was a really well-received record. It was a big success. Now, how do you follow that? They've done it before, but this was my first rodeo with that kind of situation — following up something that's been really well received. That was a challenge, but it's a good challenge to have because you have to up the bar on yourself.

Can't you make yourself crazy constantly trying to better yourself?

FAULKNER: Challenges are what make albums unique, and there's always a unique challenge for every album. When I was younger, maybe it was financial constraints. You didn't have enough time in the studio, or the studio wasn't big enough, or didn't work the way you wanted it to. There are always challenges you have to work around. With *Angel of Retribution,* I was getting my studio bearings. And then we couldn't record during a pandemic. And then we had a tour, so we had to record during the gaps in the tour. That was another challenge. But the challenges always happen right up until the album is complete and you're satisfied. Before that, you're always thinking it could be better or it's not quite right, so you work on it to embellish it or make it more interesting.

Can you think of a particular challenge you faced with a song on *Invincible Shield*?

FAULKNER: The original version of "Panic Attack" had another slower part before the guitar solo. It was too long. It didn't feel right, so we took it out. When it's right, you know it's right, but sometimes it's hard to tell



ROB HALFORD: "IT'S GLORIOUS THAT WE'RE STILL OUT THERE. IF THAT ISN'T THE EMBODIMENT OF METAL NEVER DYING, I DON'T KNOW WHAT IS"

Faulkner and Halford do their thing in Ljubljana, Slovenia, July 12, 2022. "We did a lot together," Faulkner says. "Rob and I would put ideas together in the studio"

MARIO SKRABAN/REDFERNS

why it's *not* right. One thing I always think about is if it's not grooving, it's not right. When it's vibing, that's when you know you've finally gotten it.

Glenn, you've been upfront about how you can't play the way you used to because of Parkinson's disease, which must be terribly frustrating. Did you change the way you worked as a band to accommodate your condition?

GLENN TIPTON: No, the three of us all worked together the same as normal. However, it is hard for me to give 100 percent now due to my Parkinson's so Richie took more of the load. But I always try to look forward and ahead and be optimistic — that's how I go about my guitar playing.

FAULKNER: Writing-wise, when we were in the room together, and when Glenn had an idea, but he couldn't play it, he would communicate the idea to me and tell me what to do. That might trigger a new idea from me, so there was a lot of back and forth. There were other ideas he had that he *could* play, and he played those.

TIPTON: I have to take each day as it comes. Some days I feel strong, so I have a good day and I can play more. And others I feel weak so I can't really play much.

HALFORD: Yes, but Glenn — his input, his validity, the reference points that he makes with his hands — are all over this album. So, as far as what this man stands for in the life of Judas Priest, the relationship hasn't changed a bit. The only thing that's changed is the way Parkinson's has robbed him of his articulation on the guitar. So, he has very, very carefully passed over certain feelings toward the guitar passages to Richie. You're hearing guitars that make you think of Glenn because that's the way Glenn would perform. But it's Richie playing a lot of it. So Glenn is all over this album. He's playing on a lot of the songs, but those moments where he wasn't able to, Richie is picking up and carrying that metal torch for Glenn.

Glenn, do you sit or hold the guitar differently when you play, or play a lighter guitar?

TIPTON: No, I do everything the same and I still use my same guitars — the Hamer Phantom Signature Model and my Hamer Signature GTX. But I have to work very hard to get the sounds I want these days. I did come up with some guitar parts on my own, but when Richie was involved, he took the ideas I put forward and improved on them.

Richie, when you came in with a song, did Glenn work with you on it or did you just record what you wrote?

FAULKNER: Glenn knows exactly how to make something sound like Priest. I might come in with an almost complete song, and Glenn would suggest a little turnaround that was totally out of my school of thinking, and it made the song better. And then there are a couple of songs on the record, "Sons of Thunder" and "Escape From Reality," and those were primarily Glenn's ideas, and he had more to do with them. Obviously, it was a challenge to make everything work, but I think we knew how to handle it and we all worked together in a way that was really rewarding.

HALFORD: What's interesting about Richie is the way I've watched him transform from the guitar player that he was when he first became the lead guitarist for Judas Priest for *Redeemer of Souls*, to the creative and empathetic musician he is today. Glenn mentored Richie, and Richie loves Glenn so much that the understanding of everything Glenn has done with Priest has become a part of who Richie is. And that understanding has been very profound. Over the past 10 or so years, Richie has matured and blossomed as a guitarist so he has his own identity — his own distinctive way of playing — and at the same time, he's been able to move to another place to pick up for another guitar player. There are very few people that can do that and do it so well and with such love and such care and understanding, so that you get an extraordinary performance whether Richie is playing something he wrote or playing something for Glenn.

Richie, did you play all the leads on the album?

FAULKNER: Not all of them. Glenn could manage "Sons of Thunder," "Vicious Circle" and a couple others. But if he couldn't play something, I took the helm.

most of the song, and it has a different texture to it than the rest of the album. The song is downtuned, and when you downtune a song, it takes on a different character. There's a darker atmosphere both lyrically and sonically. I tried to match that with the guitar parts. It's even got a bit of a 'Killing Machine' vibe in the middle. I wrote the midsection, and in that part Rob did this Ozzy, Birmingham-esque kind of vocal treatment, which I love."

"SONS OF THUNDER"

"That was the other song Glenn brought in. It's very Priest. Some songs bring up certain imagery right away, and when you hear 'Sons of Thunder' you can imagine motorbikes roaring down the freeway. There's this real 'Hell Bent for Leather' vibe to it. We all stood around the microphone and did gang vocals on the chorus to give it a metal community-type feel. There are two solos on that; I did the first one, and the second one is Glenn. His is short and to the point; he has a talent for getting everything that needs to be said in the shortest possible time. That's the mark of a great songwriter."

"GIANTS IN THE SKY"

"It's not completely downtuned. It's in drop D. Everything else is in either E or E♭. So "Giants in the Sky" has more of a bluesy, riffy vibe. It's about the legends we've lost like Lemmy and Ronnie James Dio. But the music they made lives on. There's an acoustic part in the middle, which I played on a nylon-string Spanish classical guitar. That kind of guitar is what separates the men from the boys because it doesn't hide any mistakes. The strings are tougher. It took me probably a whole day before we got the take that we used — because it's just hard, man. I'm not that manly to play those strings and be that precise. Every pop and scrape and missed note shows up, and it's really unforgiving. To be honest, I came away from there thinking I should play more acoustic guitar purely to get my chops up, strengthen my hands and make me a more precise player. But I didn't really do that."

— Jon Wiederhorn

Faulkner on stage at the 37th Annual Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony in Los Angeles, November 5, 2022

THEO WARGO/GETTY IMAGES FOR THE ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAME

Did you try to play those leads in Glenn's style?

FAULKNER: As a player, I'm so heavily influenced by Glenn anyway, but I don't play as much legato as him. I come from the Zakk Wylde school of picking, and Zakk picks every note. I can't do that, but I pick most of the notes. There's a little bit of legato in my style, but there was definitely more legato going on before. But having said that, I did kind of take on that role of playing a lot of Glenn's parts. If he couldn't do it, I'd take on that role. There's stuff I played on that's unmistakably Tipton, both in the composition and guitar technique. But that's why he's such a vital and important part of Priest.

What guitar sound were you shooting for on *Invincible Shield*? It sounds very Priest, but as you said, there's something about the sound that makes it very relevant today.

FAULKNER: Well, it's a good old Marshall JCM800 with a Tube Screamer-type pedal in the front. It's a tried and tested approach when it comes to the way we EQ my sound. I'm quite a mid-heavy player, anyway. I think it gives the guitar extra presence and character. But after I recorded everything with my setup, I sent the tracks to producer Andy Sneap, and he re-amped them in his studio because I've got no time for

> **RICHIE FAULKNER: "THE ONLY RULE WAS THAT IT HAD TO SOUND LIKE JUDAS PRIEST, AND THAT LEFT A LOT OF ROOM TO EXPLORE"**

microphone placement, and Andy is a real authority on that. So I sent him the DI tracks and he put them through cabinets and amplifiers that he's got. He was using 800s and plexis to find that good, old Priest sound. There aren't many effects there, but there's a bit of reverb and delay that was done post-production. But at the heart of it, it's that Marshall sound through a Gibson Explorer and one of my Flying Vs.

An Ibanez Tube Screamer is a go-to for blues and other kinds of rock, but when you play it through a tube amp it tightens up the low ends and provides extra texture.

FAULKNER: You ramp up the distortion on the JCM800 and that's the main sound. The Tube Screamer wasn't an Ibanez — it was a clone of a clone, a [*Wampler*] Tumnus [*overdrive*] that I have in front of my amps on stage.

Would *Invincible Shield* be a good swan song for Judas Priest, or will there be another album?

FAULKNER: Who knows? If this one's well received and there are enough ideas creatively to do another one, then it's possible. We'll have to wait and see, really. At this moment, I'm out of ideas. I've got nothing left. That always happens with me, and then I start coming up with things. But where are these ideas going to come from? I don't know. But somehow, somewhere along the line, you start building up ideas and songs. They come from somewhere. After *Firepower* I was out of ideas and then we somehow created *Invincible Shield*. We'll see what the future holds.

HALFORD: I think Richie is an endless well of guitar ideas, and Glenn has vaults of riffs we've never used, and a good riff will last forever. It's all about perspective and presentation. When you've got all that sorted out, why stop? There's a fire that's really burning right now and it has been even before *Invincible Shield* left the launch pad. Right now, we're focused on touring for the album, but when we finish touring, what are we going to do? Well, Priest has always maintained its relevance and importance in metal by showing you what we can do next. And the other thing is, I don't like 19. It's an odd number. I'm an "even number" kind of guy. I like 20. But the bottom line is it's absolutely glorious that we're still out there. Glenn's still thriving as a musician, and so is Richie after what he went through with his heart condition. I'm thriving after what I went through with my cancer condition. If that isn't the embodiment of metal never dying and metal never surrendering, then I don't know what is. There's this importance in our lives as musicians to never give up and never give in, to also keep pushing ahead and going toward the metal torch on the horizon. That's what drives us.

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A DESIGN FOR LIFE

Words Jonathan Horsley

Celebrating 70 years of the Stratocaster: a story of evolution in guitar design and revolution in guitar music

The Fender Stratocaster is the most successful electric guitar design of all time. No guitar has shaped popular culture like the Strat. Its double-cutaway design is the acme of guitar shapes, arguably the most copied, the most easily recognisable. The Stratocaster's cultural legacy, ignited in 1957 when Buddy Holly debuted it with the Crickets on The Ed Sullivan Show, transcends the instrument itself.

Its story is not just about its impact on guitarists' imagination. And yet as a musical instrument, a piece of engineered design, it has remained relevant, a fact that rests upon its player-friendly ergonomics, with contouring to accommodate the forearm and to sit better against the body, the versatility of the three-pickup format, but also a subtle but telling evolution in its specifications that has often been led by those who played it. Some of the standard specs we see in Fender's Stratocaster lineup today – the five-way switching, bridge humbuckers – came from players. Before 1977, Strat players had to manually manipulate the three-way switch to get those in-between sounds of Positions 2 and 4, the sort that Jimi Hendrix popularised.

The modular build allows players to modify components or swap them out entirely. Not getting along with the tremolo? Block it off. If it's got screws you can unscrew it; if it has got solder, it can be rewired. You would not be the first to execute the Dan Armstrong/HSH wiring mod that connects all three single-coils to the neck tone control, allowing you to use the middle tone control to select between regular single-coil operation or to combine the neck and bridge pickups with the middle in series for humbucking tones – a new trick for an already versatile guitar.

Do you want more from your bridge pickup? You could fit a steel inductance plate under it, then remove it if you don't like it. Don't like the neck shape? Someone will sell you a spare. That's how Eric Clapton's Blackie came to be. It was a buyer's market for Strats in 1970 and Clapton was buying. Taking full advantage of the bolt-on build he had the neck from his alder-bodied '56 Strat swapped out for a '57 neck, its V-shape more to his liking. He changed the pickups, too, kitting Blackie out with a greatest hits of Strat pickups so far. In a coupe de grace, he blocked out the vibrato, too. Blackie was his "mongrel". In Pasadena, California, a young Eddie Van Halen was paying attention...

Some of the most radical specs found on today's Stratocasters were borne of artist collaborations, such as the onboard fuzz circuit on the Steve Lacy 'People Pleaser' Strat, or the 12dB mid-boost circuit of the Juanes Strat. Ed O'Brien's Strat has a Fernandes Sustainer at the neck position. Does all this mean that Leo Fender *didn't* get it right the first time around? Well, maybe. But consider this: for all the changes over the years to the pickups, neck shape, vibrato design, hardware, tonewoods, fret-size, fingerboard radius and so on, the concept of the Stratocaster has changed little since

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its 1954 launch. Leo Fender created an archetype. He created a platform. It was designed to evolve.

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

Leo Fender did not act alone. It was his name on the headstock, his company, his call – but he had help. Not being a musician, he needed assistance when designing a follow-up to the Telecaster. Feedback from pro players was invaluable – not to mention their ideas. Freddie Tavares, a Hawaiian steel guitarist who worked with Dean Martin and Elvis Presley, who played the famous intro music to Warner Bros' *Looney Tunes* features, can take much of the credit for the shape, which took cues from the Precision Bass. Bill Carson had the right stuff as the Strat's test pilot (and catalogue model). Speaking to guitar historian Tony Bacon for a 2019 *Reverb* piece, Carson recalled the early knock-ups to be "very ugly, but very playable" and with plenty finessing to be done – the prototypes Fender and his lieutenant George Fullerton presented him lacked balance.

"A big part with me was that the guitar should fit like a good shirt and stay balanced at all times," said Carson. "I said that so many times that Freddie and Leo both got pretty tired of hearing it. But finally they glued a horn on the upper bout, and it was pretty close to balancing. They extended it one more time, and it did balance, but it was really ugly by the standards of the day. Then Freddie Tavares said it wouldn't be quite so ugly if we put a small horn on the lower side and gave it a little symmetry there, so we did that."

Carson attributed the front-mounted jack design to Fullerton. Fender sales executive Don Randall named it the Stratocaster. Its contours owed much to country-western guitarist Rex Gallion's input. Gallion's reward was a custom build bearing the serial number #0001, finished in white, that would later be owned by Seymour Duncan, and ultimately David Gilmour, who used it on Pink Floyd's *Another Brick On The Wall*. That a Strat could exit the factory in 1954/'54 and be played on a landmark rock release from 1979, with Gilmour describing the guitar as "perfect", speaks to the success of Fender's early work.

Not everything was perfect, though. Production ground to a halt in 1953 when the vibrato design proved not fit for purpose. It made the guitar sound like a "tin can", said Fullerton, who sounded the alarm. That ultimately delayed the guitar's release, costing Fender a lot of money. But the redesigned unit, which incorporated a steel block and would be named the synchronized tremolo, sounded just right.

Back in the 1950s, the Strat's specifications would change from month to month. Maple fingerboards with nitrocellulose lacquer looked worn quickly so rosewood was brought in – ironically, decades later, with players' appetites honed by the vintage market, players gladly paid extra for this on Custom Shop relics. This on-the-fly tweaking from the factory floor presaged the modding and DIY partscaster movements. The partscaster, literally a Strat put together from different parts – custom made, vintage, salvaged, whatever – might not be a Fender-branded instrument but the practice channels the spirit of Leo Fender.

But to become iconic, for the Stratocaster to sustain itself, its revolutionary musical potential needed to be demonstrated, onstage and before witnesses. What better way to show just what the Strat was capable of than turning a right-handed model upside down, restringing it for a lefty, and playing it through dimed Marshall and Sunn stacks? What better way to baptise it as a countercultural weapon than dousing it with lighter fluid and baptising it in fire? For the Strat to become a legend it needed to be played by them. Enter, Hendrix et al...

FOLK, FIRE AND ACID: NEWPORT, MONTEREY, WOODSTOCK

One it rolled off the production line in California, the Stratocaster needed moments to capture the public's imagination. If Buddy Holly effectively introduced it to the world in '57, it was Bob Dylan who first recognised its potential for torpedoing staid genre expectations, taking to the stage at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival with a '64 Strat for an electric performance that lasted just 17 minutes but will be remembered for eternity. As many hated it as were thrilled. What they had seen, however, was a first. How were they supposed to react?

"In 1965 it was probably the loudest thing anyone in the audience had ever heard," wrote Joe Boyd in his 2006 memoir, *White Bicycles: Making Music In The 1960s*. "A buzz of shock and amazement ran through the crowd... There were shouts of delight and triumph and also of derision and outrage."

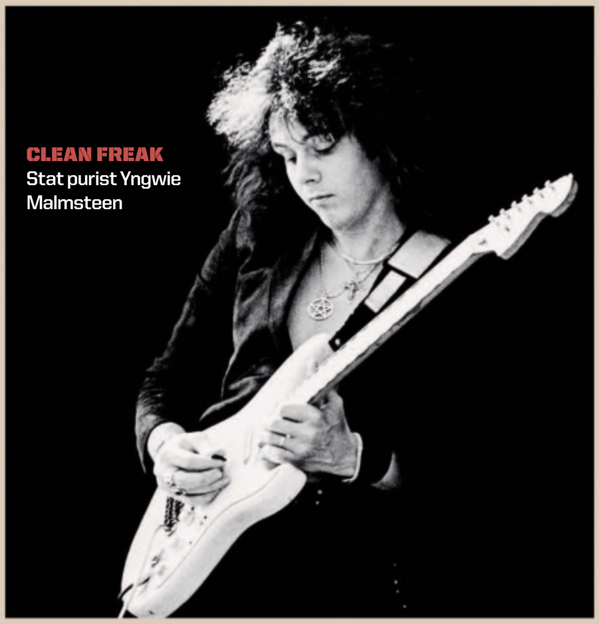
Radicalism was in the air in the late '60s. Jimi Hendrix had the chops to articulate it through a blues style turned inside out with psychedelics, and a preternatural feel for the force of volume and sound in rock. His Strats, reversed, would facilitate his art and suffer for it. At the climax of his 1967 show at the London Astoria, he anointed his guitar with lighter fluid and set it alight, a test run for his forthcoming performance at Monterey Pop, where he closed out the set with *Wild Thing* and the sacrifice of his '65 Strat.

"We had our beautiful rock-blues-country-funky-freaky sound, and it was really turning people on," Hendrix recalled in the biography *Starting At Zero: His Own Story*. "I felt like we were turning the whole world on to this new thing, the best, most lovely new thing. So I decided to destroy my guitar at the end of the song as a sacrifice. You sacrifice things you love. I love my guitar."

By Woodstock '69, Hendrix's guitar was doing the destroying. This '68 Strat in Olympic White – aka "Izabella", serial number #240981 – did the damage during a triumphant set that turned *The Star-Spangled Banner* into a pulsating work of psych-noise, an instrumental protest song. The Strat officially got its stripes.

SUSTAINING IT

Tastes change in music. The '70s tastes for humbuckers challenged the Strat's appeal, but did it ever go out of fashion? The Strat could still count on standard bearers such as the aforementioned Gilmour and Clapton, Genesis' Mike Rutherford,



CLEAN FREAK
Stat purist Yngwie Malmsteen

George Harrison, Ritchie Blackmore, Jeff Beck and Nile Rodgers, whose Hitmaker Strat has sold more records than any other.

Fender's CBS era, from the mid-'60s to early '80s, was a difficult time for the brand. There were a lot of spec updates. Not all landed.

Some players, like Eddie Van Halen, took matters into their own hands. The need for a high-performance Strat variant with a humbucker at the bridge was the impetus for his Frankenstrat, which seated a Gibson PAF in a Strat body, and over time developed into the ur-Superstrat, complete with double-locking Floyd Rose vibrato. Ex-Fender employer Wayne Charvel, who had been making a living servicing guitars and selling parts, entered the hot-rod business, working with Grover Jackson on bespoke high-performance S-styles. The Charvel and Jackson brands eventually came home to roost under Fender's ownership in 2002.

In the '80s, players wanted to play faster, louder. Not all coveted humbuckers. The precision of single-coils (and perhaps the influence of Blackmore, too) made the Strat Yngwie Malmsteen's weapon of choice. "I refused to hack my Strat up and put a humbucker in it because everyone else on the planet did," Malmsteen told *MusicRadar*. "And that was a big deal for my sound. People would say, 'He sounds different... Clean!'" Speaking of '80s cultural moments for Stratocasters, in a shred context, Malmsteen's 1984 album *Rising Force* is hard to beat. In blues, we had another generational talent, Stevie Ray Vaughan, redefining what was possible on a Strat.

Fender responded to Superstrat provocations with the HM Strat but did not officially have a full production run HSS Strat until 1996's Lone Star. The advances in pickup design – noiseless single-coils, stacked humbuckers – presented players, and Fender, with more opportunities for adapting the Strat for popular music's next generational shift. Nirvana's Kurt Cobain and Pearl Jam's Mike McCready played 'em and smashed 'em.

It helps that the human form is unchanged; the Strat is still sympathetic to our physiology. Its growing vocabulary of sounds and features, Fender's Janus-faced expansion of the Strat catalogue, both looking forwards to new looks and features and backwards to reanimate classic designs in its Vintera, American Vintage and Custom Shop lines are all factors in keeping it relevant – not to mention Fender recognising the Strat as an ideal beginner guitar, and producing them under its affordable Squier sub-brand.

Moreover, it is still being played; by Idles' Mark Bowen on The Tonight Show, by H.E.R. at the Super Bowl... and remember John Mayer's legendary 2009 Grammys performance of *Gravity*? Each generation finding its own sound, impressing their identity onto the Stratocaster, as only a good instrument allows. And occasionally setting it on fire or smashing it into pieces because, as Hendrix says, you have to make sacrifices for art...

BELOW LEFT
Bob Dylan plays a Stratocaster for the first time on stage at the Newport Folk Festival, 1965

BELOW RIGHT
Jimi Hendrix with his black Strat onstage at the Monterey Pop Festival, 1967

"I REFUSED TO HACK MY STRAT UP AND PUT A HUMBUCKER IN IT BECAUSE EVERYONE ELSE ON THE PLANET DID!"
YNGWIE MALMSTEEN

@GETTY

A NEW GENERATI

Words Phil Weller

SUPER STAR
H.E.R. rocks the Super Bowl as guest of Usher on February 11, 2024

The hottest Strat players in the world right now – from H.E.R. to Idles and beyond...

As Fender celebrates the 70th anniversary of the Stratocaster, a wide-ranging generation of modern players are putting its tonal versatility through its paces like never before. Regardless of who picks one up and what they do with it, the Strat continues to excel in every environment.

Super Bowl LVIII proved high-class entertainment on and off the pitch, and H.E.R's classy halftime show solo was right at the heart of it. The first black female artist to be bestowed with a signature Stratocaster in 2020, her satin-smooth R&B playing has been turning heads for nearly a decade.

The Californian musician has cited watching Prince and Lenny Kravitz music videos growing up as life-affirming moments, and speaking in 2020, she explained how her soloing style is as inspired by vocalists as much as blues greats. "I like to play my guitar like I'm singing, so I go for melodies that might feel a bit closer to what a singer would do, as opposed to a guitar player," she said. "Sometimes, I like to sing and play my solos at the same time, even harmonising my voice with my guitar."

With that comes a love for minimalism where, though she can shred her fretboard alight, feel vastly outweighs acrobatics. "Everything I do is based on the pentatonic scales," she explained. "I grew up listening to B.B. King, Albert King and John Lee Hooker. I do like to get melodic and do a little bit of fancy stuff, but all the feeling I find is in the blues. I like making people feel something with just one note."

Since 2020, she has enjoyed three variants of her signature, Vintage Noiseless pickups-stocked Stratocaster, and she hopes it can be a tool to inspire. "This is my expression," she said at the time of its launch. "I think it will inspire a lot of young black girls – and actually a lot of young girls in general – to pick up the guitar, which is something we don't see enough of."

Fellow Californian Steve Lacy is another Strat-lover rooted in the R&B aesthetic. The magic of single-coils really shines through his clean, chimy tones to the point where you can hear his pick hit the strings. It gives his chord-focused playing a personable charm across songs where his Strat brings colourful texture so his storytelling vocals can thrive. Lacy is a terrific example of how guitarists don't always need to be flashy to impress.

Angel Olson takes a similar approach in using raw guitars as storytelling vehicles. The singer-songwriter's music is filled with energy and angst, her tones typically sandpaper-smooth for that 'amp that's fallen off a back of a truck' vibe where it's not so much about riffs as it is the atmosphere they create. Her playing can feel vulnerable on songs such as *Unfucktheworld*, or furious and frenzied, like the chorus pedal-laced alt-rock crescendo of *Shut Up Kiss Me*, but it always feels resolutely her.

Biffy Clyro's Simon Neil, however, is arguably the most famous modern day Strat super-fan. Across nine studio albums, the Scottish trio's sound has been hugely transformative. Journeying from stripped back garage alt-rock to the world-conquering riffs of *Only Revolutions*, with their modern sound a blend of the two, a Squier Strat has always been by his side. Even at their most polished, the kind of grittiness only budget gear can deliver reigns supreme, proving money isn't everything. Whether churning out barely overdriven single note riffs – see *Bubbles* and *Weird Leisure* – or battering ears with drop-tuned powerchords – *The Captain, Wolves Of Winter* – Neil's playing remains a scintillating hybrid of clever catchiness and feral mania that would sound second rate on any other guitar.

That same wildness wriggles beneath the fingers of Nigerian guitarist Mdou Moctar, who transforms his instrument into a symbol of protest. With his new album, *Funeral For Justice*, he says "nothing is toned down" and that his psychedelic rock has never sounded "louder, faster and wilder". Its title track is conclusive evidence of that, where his biting single coils bare their teeth like starving wolves.

The Stratocaster has often been at the epicentre of invention and intriguing stylistic cocktails. Shubh Saran is one such player continuing that trend. Born in India, Saran grew up in four continents and six countries as his parents moved around for work. While this blurred his cultural lines, he grounded his musical foundation in the singular chord-shape songwriting of punk, whilst an Indian approach to melodies coloured his licks.

Photo Getty

ON

AMERICAN MADE
Parquet Courts' Andrew Savage

Gamakas – the way Indian musicians dance between notes in a scale – are a key part of his musical palette, which has gotten more progressive over time.

Today, Allan Holdsworth and Derek Trucks are major influences for the John Mayer-Strat playing Saran as he manoeuvres, amongst other projects, through his prog jazz solo work and the electronic jazz/EDM of *Sungazer*. That's led to him jamming on stage with Plini and subsequently blowing the Aussie's mind. "I love that guy," Plini told Guitar World last year. "He'd come on stage and play the weirdest sh*t from other realms of playing that I would never think of. We'd look at him like, 'What the f*ck is happening?'"

Floya's Marv Wilder, meanwhile, has put modern rock and EDM one hell of a collision course. Equal parts Eurovision pomp, fizzing electronica and hip-swinging rock, Wilder's lead lines are the icing on the band's genre-blending cake, with the glorious solo *The Hymn* a clear highlight.

To those ends, Andrew Savage and Austin Brown of New York indie outfit Parquet Courts bring their own spin on alternative rock. Sharp, Talking Heads-esque clean tones and a Kinks-go-punk swagger are their calling cards. Their no-nonsense songwriting oozes a sense of care-free nostalgia, which is a world away from London-based multi-instrumentalist Flo Blue's music. Amalgamating velvety jazz and folky turns with pop sensibilities, her songs are full of colour and interesting rhythmic choices without ever losing sight of an addictive hook.

Perhaps it's the textural versatility of Stratocasters which makes them so valuable. Taking things down an indie folk route, Buck Meek's writing in Big Thief and his sparsely furnished solo work always ushers a warming tonality from his Strat. Be it on the country-twanged *Cannonball!* or Big Thief's *Vampire Empire*, his playing always feels like an embrace from a long-lost friend.

Despite nestling in a post-punk pool, Carlos O'Connell and Conor Curley of Ireland's Fontaines D.C. ooze a similarly warm moodiness from their Stratocasters, employing 1961 American Vintage II and Rory Gallagher tribute models among a slew of Jaguars, Teles, and Jazzmasters. Yet, despite that warmth, there's a chill icing their tones at times, as the haunting refrain of *Roman Holiday* attests.

That's a chill that Bristol's Idles crank to the max and lacquer with bare-knuckle-boxer ruggedness. Speaking to *Guitarist* earlier this year, Mark Bowen explained how is time-worn '72 Strat originally belonged to his father, and it's one he calls "unique and weird". He's gotten rid of its tone knobs as he simply doesn't use them, its finish is beyond knackered after being covered in tape over the years, its varnish strummed clean off. But what it lacks in pageant-ready perfection it more than makes up for in charisma. He's also installed a high-output Creamery pickup in the bridge to accentuate the twang from his D and G strings, which makes for a wonderful contrast to his blue baritone Strat.

"The best thing about baritones is that they're twangy and meaty at the same time," he enthuses. Its guttural character, which he pairs with a Vox AC30 amp, is all over new album, *TANGK*.

Cory Wong is one of the modern-day poster boys for the Strat thanks to his relentless right-hand technique. Cory Hanson is another leading exponent. Whether he's unfurling gritty psych textures in Wand, toning things down with Ty Segall or stomping through garage rock hits with former outfit Together Pangea, he's usually bringing his Olympic White 1972 Fender Stratocaster along for the ride. His ever-growing CV shows him as something of a musical chameleon, but whichever way he points his guitar playing, his Strat has always proved a reliable weapon.

For Larkin Poe's Rebecca Lovell and her husband Tyler Bryant, Strats are a part of the family. Bryant, professes a love for '50s builds, with an American Original and a '59 in his arsenal, and oozes for suave, rolling blues rock licks from his fingertips. Lovell's go-to, meanwhile, is a '60s-style Custom Shop model. A Seymour Duncan humbucker in the bridge fattens her stylish bluesy playing, which works as a striking counterpoint to sister Megan's lap steel.

Speaking of counterpoints, Leprous' Robin Ognedal's Strat collection has helped create a potent dichotomy with co-guitarist Tor Oddmund Suhrke's six- and eight-string Aristides. While Suhrke's tone is all about balls, Ognedal's thinner, more cutting lines typify the modern metal and prog rock blend the Norwegians have learnt to master over their 23-year career. His love of maple fretboards and glassy tones creates a playing style more in line with John Mayer than John Petrucci, as the band sits in a pocket that is both vintage and modern.

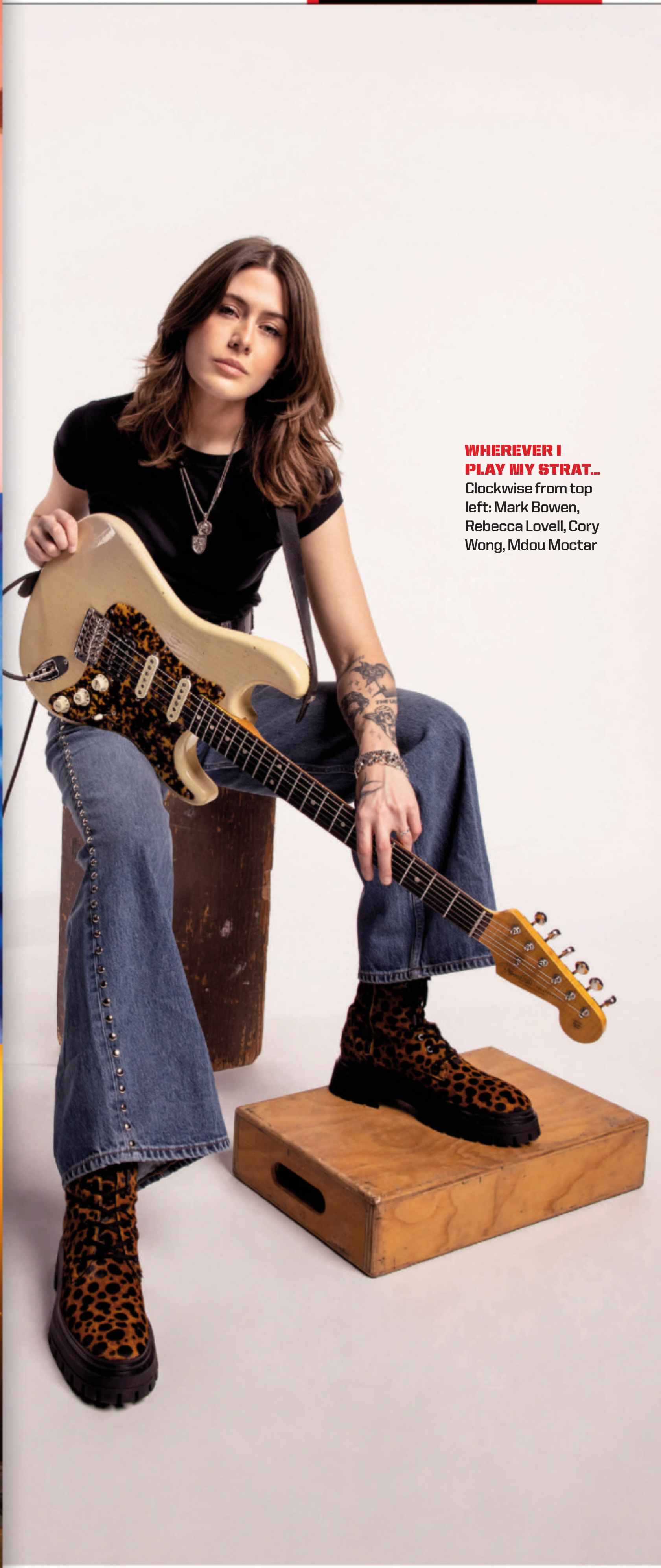
It's a feat that defines the work of Boston's Snakedersch, too. When he's not playing an Abasi Concepts guitar, channelling its creator's innovative jazz-prog playing style, he's utilising the brightness of Strats to great effect. His latest EP *Edges* is rich with ethereal textures and shining leads in a manner not too dissimilar to the fusion-coloured licks of Owane. He's also finding that Strats are right at home in the modern instrumental prog world whilst leaning heavily into the world's sunnier landscapes.

Another bright spark in that talent-littered world is Joshua De La Victoria, whose namesake project Victoria sees him joining forces with Animals As Leader drummer Matt Garstka. Their music ranges from laid-back lucidity to thumping, off-kilter passages. Light and accessible but deceptively complex jazz, churned out through a reliced white Stratocaster, sits at its core.

Eras may come and go, but whatever's in vogue in the musical world, you can trust that the iconic purrs and growls of a Fender Stratocaster will be heard within it.

"THE BEST THING ABOUT BARITONES IS THAT THEY'RE TWANGY AND MEATY AT THE SAME TIME" MARK BOWEN

Photos Getty / Alysse Gafkjen



WHEREVER I PLAY MY STRAT... Clockwise from top left: Mark Bowen, Rebecca Lovell, Cory Wong, Mdou Moctar

Guitars and backing Jon Bishop

STRAT ICONS

TG examines the styles of some of the finest players to ever pick up a Fender Stratocaster

Fender's septuagenarian doublecut has been in the hands of a zillion guitar icons over the decades, and appeared on far more legendary recordings than we could possibly count.

When it comes down to it, the sound of this guitar is familiar to us all. It's part of the background to our lives. And for us guitarists, that means there's a lot to learn from.

In this lesson, we're looking at the signature styles of 15 Strat-wielding icons – a mix of rock pioneers, virtuosos and modern-day greats.

As usual with our tab lessons there's plenty for you to get stuck in with and you'll find accompanying audio to play along to (courtesy of our sibling mag Total Guitar).

Of course, you don't *have* to own a Strat to follow our lesson –there's something for everyone here– and we have given you a steer as to which pickup/position to use.

Right, let's plug in and get those single-coils buzzing!

1 JIMI HENDRIX (PICKUP-SELECTOR TOGGLE)

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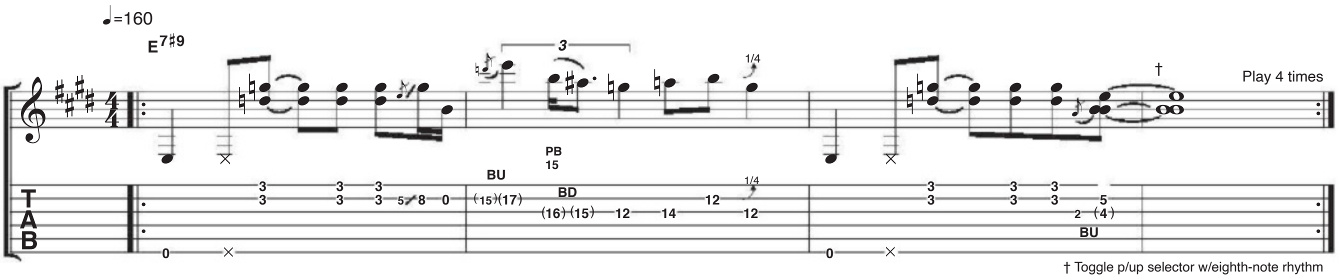

Our first example is inspired by the great Jimi Hendrix who was a master of manipulating the Strat's controls - and here we're using the pickup selector to create a pseudo wah effect. This is most effective when the neck pickup tone is turned right down. Then, simply move the selector switch back and forth and a wah-like sound is created.

2 RITCHIE BLACKMORE (BRIDGE)

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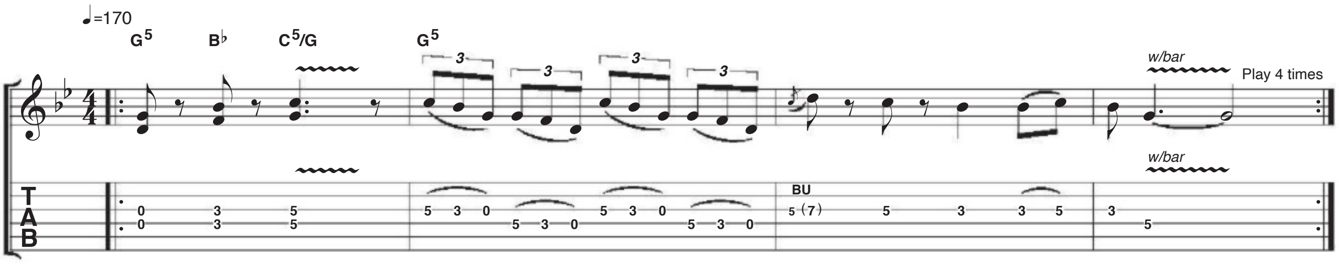

Ritchie Blackmore was famed for playing CBS-era large headstock Strats with various Fender innovations and Blackmore's own mods. He's best known for preferring a scalloped fretboard, which supposedly enhances clarity, from a fingering/fretting perspective. Scallop your pride and joy at your peril, we say!

3 DAVID GILMOUR (NECK)

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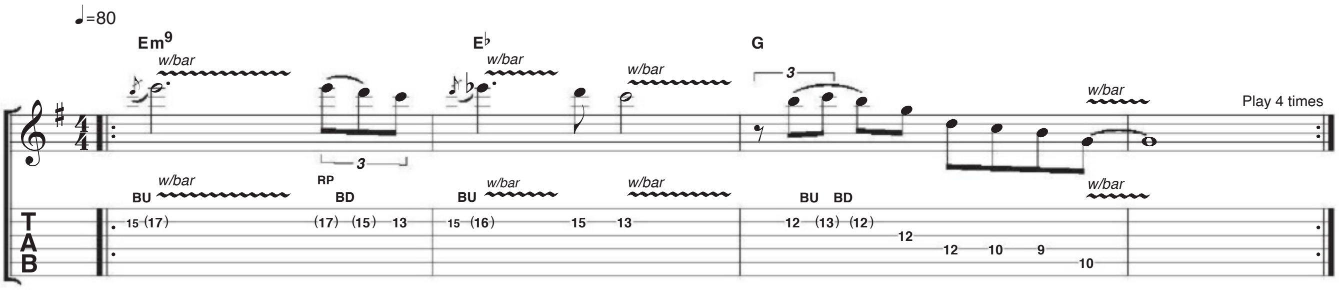

Though several Strats would pass through Gilmour's hands, he'll always be most associated with The Black Strat, as used on Pink Floyd's *Comfortably Numb* and *Shine On You Crazy Diamond*. Our example is inspired by David in clean soloing mode. Select the neck pickup and use the tremolo arm to add that signature vibrato to the string bends.

4 RORY GALLAGHER (BRIDGE)

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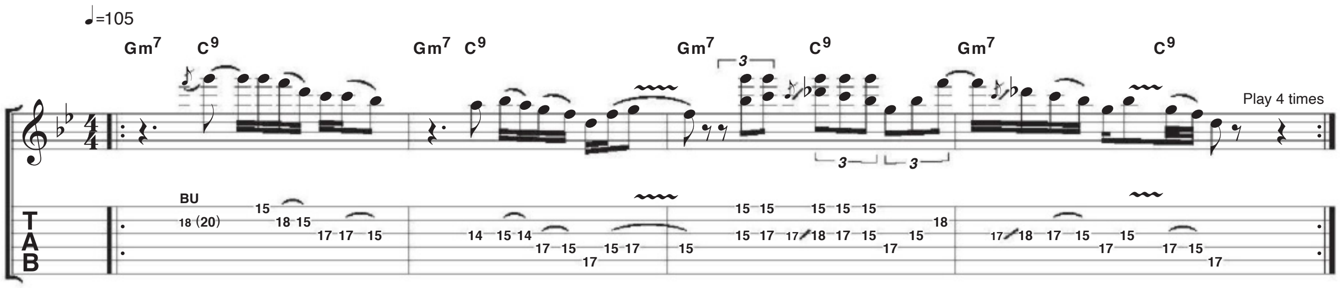

The Irish blues-rocker was best known for playing a 1961 Sunburst Strat – though most of the 'burst had worn off! Our example uses a high-output bridge single-coil pickup and a light overdrive tone, combined with a heavy pick attack, to conjure up that signature Gallagher vibe.

5 NILE RODGERS (NECK)

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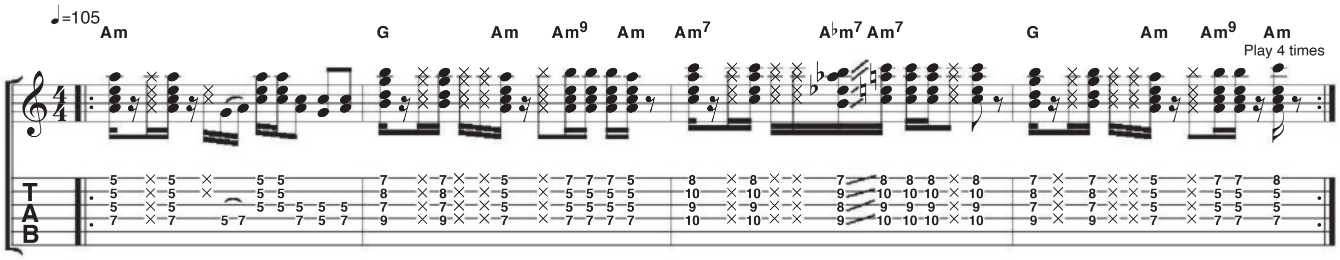

Best known for playing his 'Hit Maker' Strat, Nile Rodgers' sound has pretty much stayed the same throughout his career. For our example, we selected the neck pickup, dialing in a trebly clean tone with a little compression to even out those funky 16th-note rhythms. To get a more even attack, experiment with a thin pick just like Nile does.

6 MARK KNOPFLER (NECK/MIDDLE)

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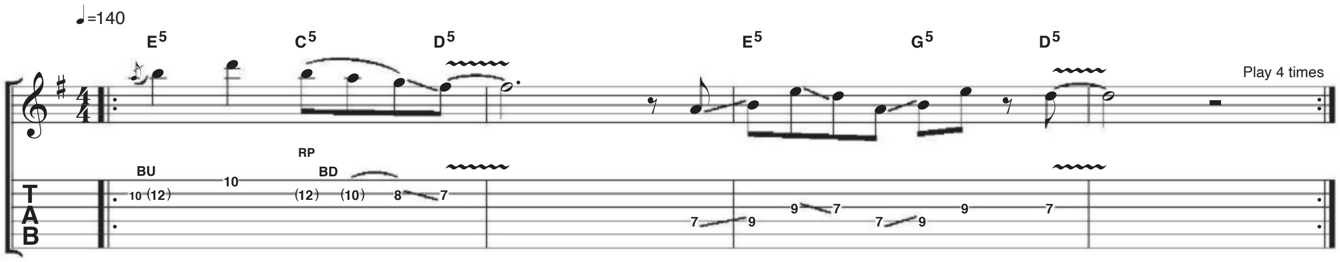

Knopfler's early Dire Straits tones were primarily the product of his Strat's bridge/middle or neck/middle pickups, the latter being more for incidental licks and the former for the 'big solos'. Plugging into clean Fender or Music Man amps, Mark augmented his tone with a Dan Armstrong Orange Squeezer compression pedal – a key trick for increasing sustain in this typical Dire Straits-style lick.

7 JEFF BECK (BRIDGE)

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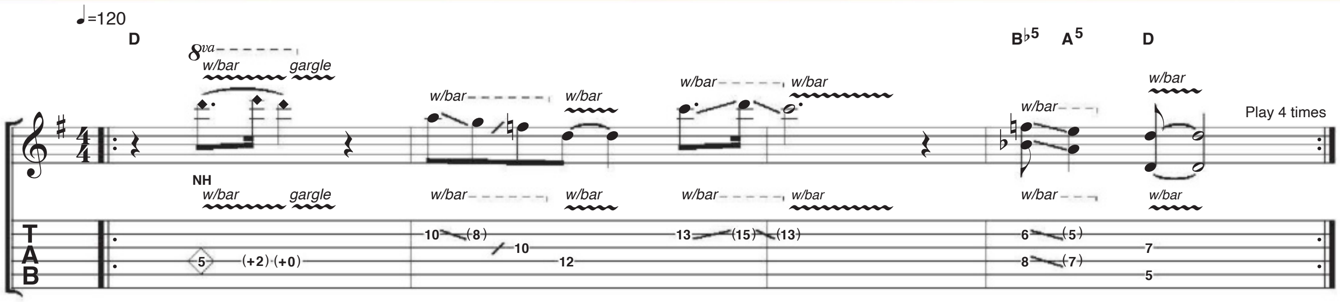

A true innovator, Jeff Beck pushed the possibilities of the Strat to the limit. It's mostly to do with his playing than the guitar's spec – although his signature axe's high-output noiseless pickups, two-point trem and roller nut help! Our example is a good workout for the tremolo arm, and also features Jeff's trademark use of natural harmonics.

8 THE EDGE (BRIDGE/MIDDLE)

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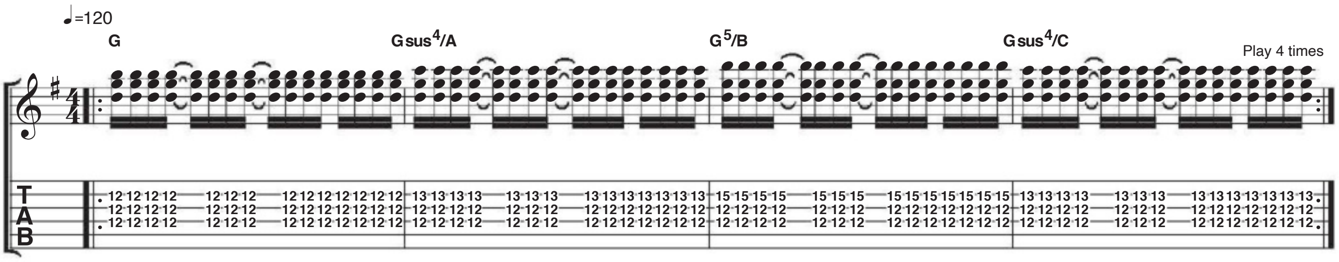

The opening tracks on U2's *The Joshua Tree* album represent some of the finest Strat clean tones ever recorded - and that's our inspiration here. Our example combines 16th-note strumming with that all-important dotted eighth-note delay. At 120 bpm, you'll need your delay set to 375ms.

9 ERIC JOHNSON (MIDDLE)

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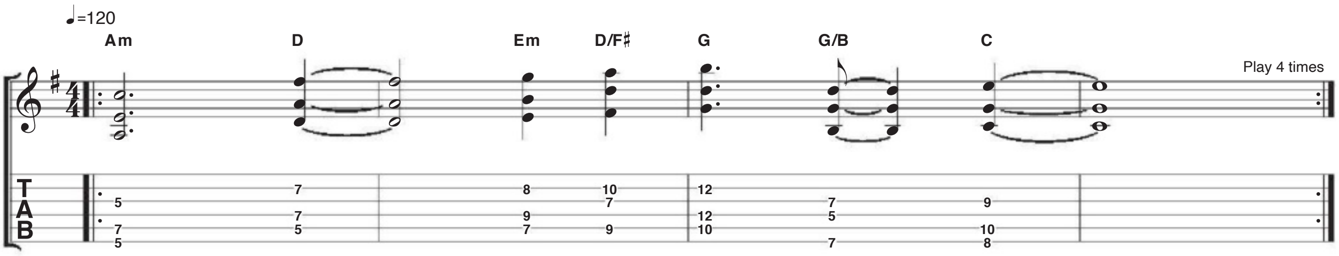

Here, we're looking at some open-voiced triads to create a colourful chord part. This is one of many signature components of Eric Johnson's style. Our clean chords are a simple introduction to the concept, but you can transfer the shapes into some complex EJ-style soloing by playing them as arpeggios. Give it a go!

10 MIKE MCCREADY (BRIDGE/MIDDLE)

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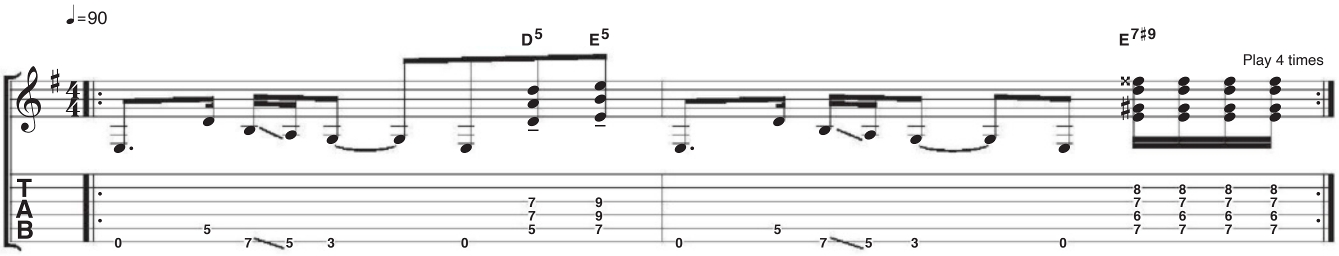

This example is inspired by Pearl Jam's heavy blues-rock riffing. We've dialled in a grungy fuzz tone with the bridge and middle pickup position. Bear in mind, Mike needs his Strat tones to sit in a mix with a second guitar - usually one of Stone Gossard's Les Pauls.

11 JOHN FRUSCIANTE (BRIDGE)

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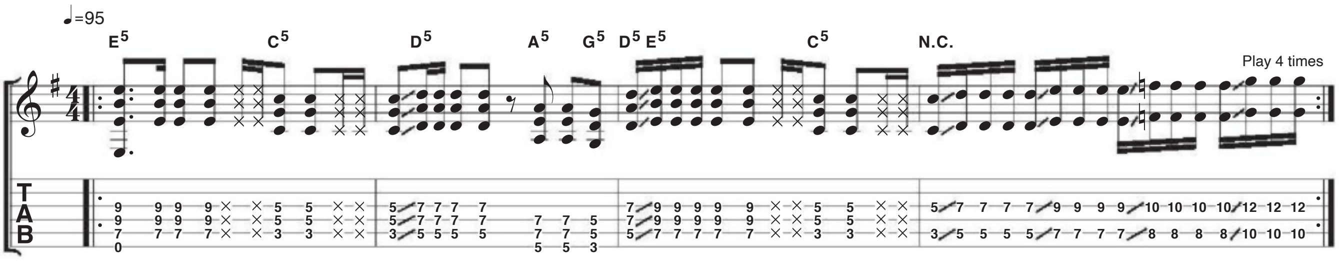

Since the *Californication* era, Red Hot Chili Peppers guitarist John Frusciante has most favoured a beaten up 1962 sunburst Strat - and it's appeared on many of the band's biggest hits since. Our example is inspired by the Chilis' classic loud, grungy chorus riffs. Select your bridge single coil and a medium overdrive Marshall tone.

12 TOM MORELLO (BRIDGE HUMBUCKER)

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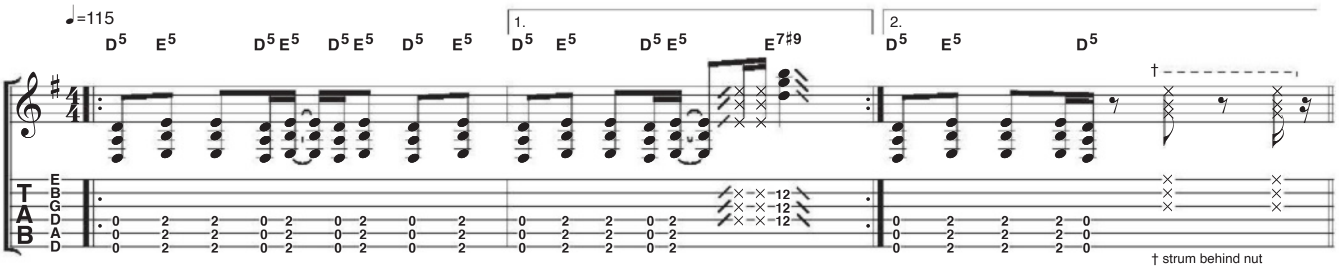

Tom Morello's Soul Power Strat features a locking tremolo system, a high-output Hot Rails humbucker and wiring modifications such as a kill swtich. Our example uses drop D tuning which makes moving between powerchords a lot easier. The final high-pitched effect is created by strumming the strings behind the nut.

13 STEVE LACY (BRIDGE)

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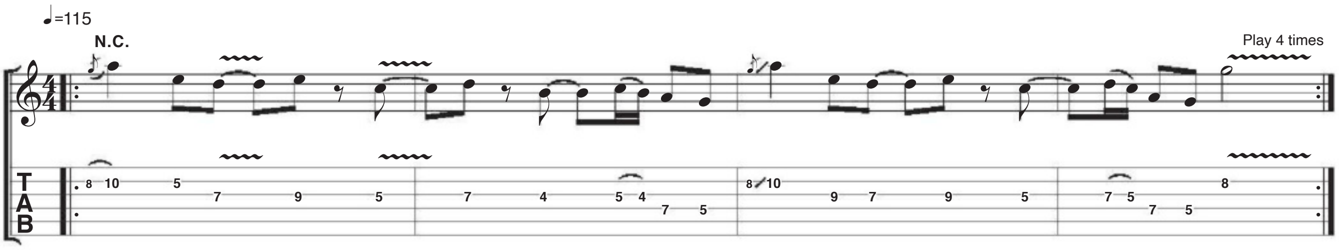

The Steve Lacey People Pleaser signature Strat comes with a built-in fuzz tone circuit, so we've dialled in a little fuzz here to create some Lacey-inspired riffing. The riff is played in unison with our bassline and uses the trusty A minor pentatonic scale as a canvas.

14 H.E.R. (MIDDLE)

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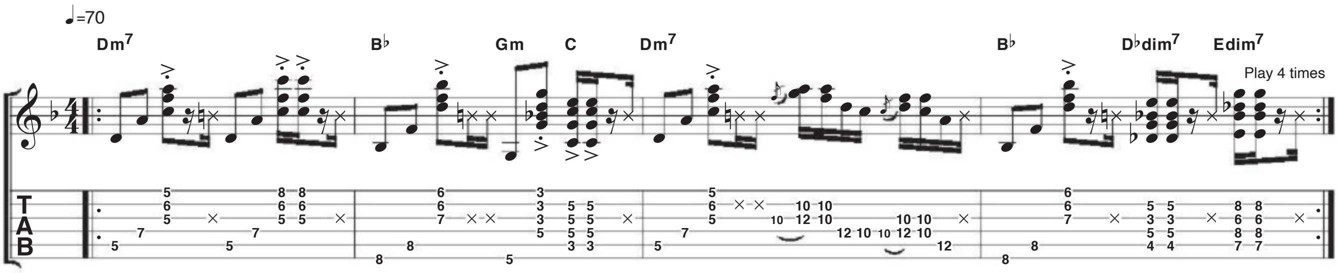

This example showcases H.E.R.'s R'n'B rhythm style – and we've used some common chords and embellished them in a slow groove. Glassy noiseless pickups (as found on the H.E.R. signature Strat) are perfect here, and, combined with some vintage-style spring reverb they give the required retro-but-modern tone.

15 MDOU MOCTAR (BRIDGE)

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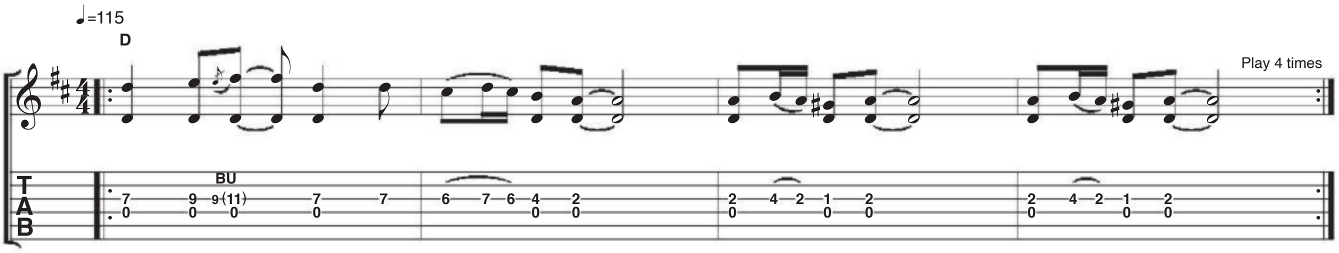

Our Mdou Moctar riff is inspired by his Hendrixian psych-rock improvised wig-outs. We're using the open D string as a drone, so keep it ringing and develop our lick with your own ideas. The G string is used as the melodic string and we're using some Middle Eastern-sounding semitone intervals.

Words, guitars and backing Charlie Griffiths

ROCK YOU!

Because we May as well, AG takes you through the techniques you need to know to play 13 of Queen's greatest songs

Brian May has been rocking Queen's repertoire for over 50 years now. And, though all four members of the band penned hit singles, it was Brian and original lead singer Freddie Mercury who took the lion's share of the writing credits. It's worth taking a moment to think about that other key element of his unique sound: the homemade Red Special guitar.

Though equipped with 'off the shelf' Burns pickups, its body, neck and sophisticated electronic switching system were all bespoke, designed and built by Brian and his father, Harold. Factor in Brian's choice of a sixpence piece as a pick and you have a tone that's near impossible to recreate.

Diehard Queen fans could invest in a BMG Red Special guitar and a Vox AC30 amp, and there are modelling options, too. Almost any digital multi-fx unit will have an AC30 model. Check out IK Multimedia's Amplitube Brian May, which not only models the AC30, but also the Red Special itself, and the band's secret weapon, the 'Deacy' amp, which was key to many of Brian's violin-esque sounds. For audio accompaniment, check out the online samples courtesy of our sibling mag Total Guitar.

01 KILLER QUEEN SOLO TECHNIQUE: PRE-BEND AND TRADEMARK VIBRATO

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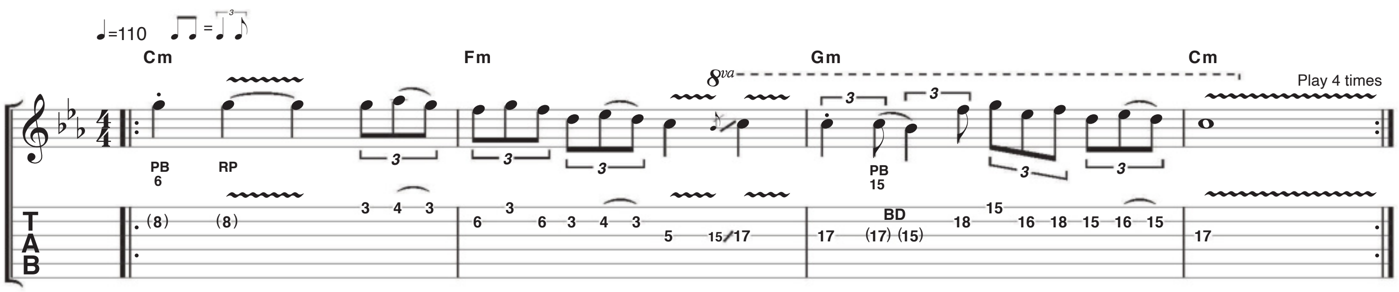
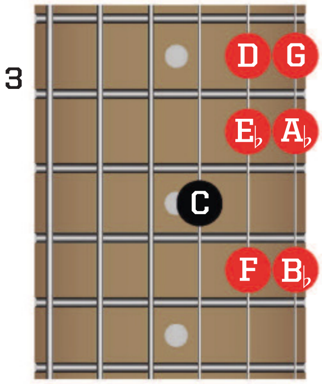


This is a subtle but important element of the Brian May style and you'll hear it right at the beginning of *KQ*'s solo. Here, in our lick, start by pre-bending the 6th fret up a tone to hit a G note. Brian employs this technique to allow his vibrato to go below the pitch of the note (whereas a wobble of a string in its rested position *raises* the pitch).

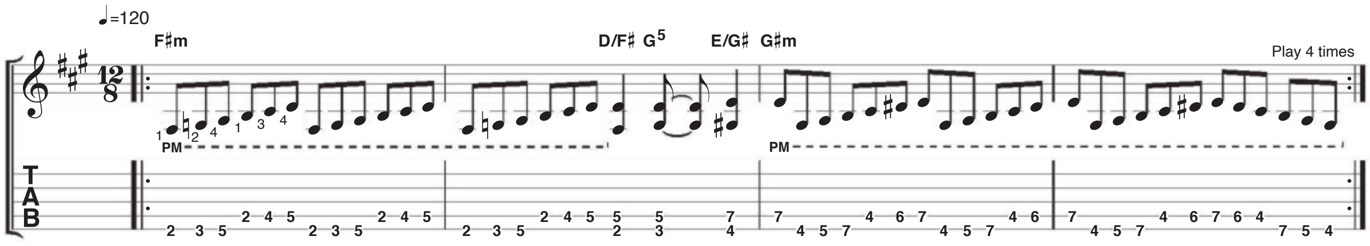


C NATURAL MINOR SCALE

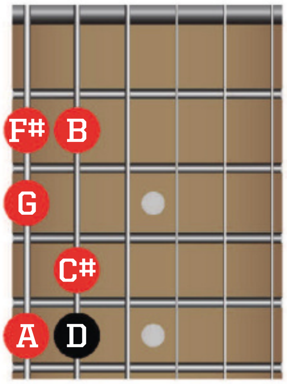
This C natural minor shape has the root note on the third string and is played using all four fingers in a one-finger-per-fret fashion. Brian employs it in bars 3 and 4 of his solo and we've used it here. Try playing it twelve frets higher up the neck to attempt Brian's octave-up phrasing.

Photo Bojan Hohnjec© Miracle Productions LLP

02 BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY **HEAVY RIFF BREAK** TECHNIQUE: THREE-NOTE-PER-STRING RIFFING bit.ly/tg381audio



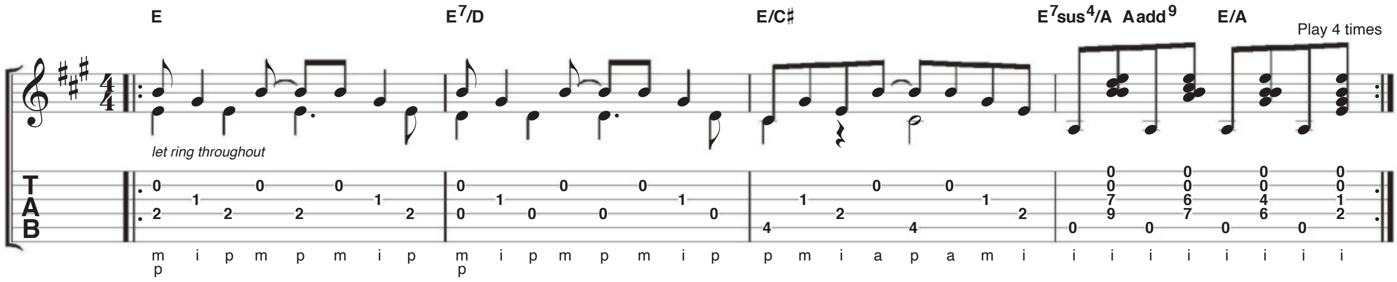
Brian admits himself that he still finds *Bo Rhap*'s heavy riff (coming in after the opera section) a challenge – perhaps because it was penned for piano by Freddie Mercury. Our simpler version shows you that you'll need two three-note fingering patterns: 124 (on the sixth string) and 134 (fifth string). Use alternate picking and, if you use a coin as a pick, use the serrated edge to create the signature Brian gritty pick attack.



D MAJOR SCALE

The original track was a semitone higher than this in E♭, but we've stayed in D to make it a friendlier key for guitar. Take note of the fingering pattern on each string and practise running up and down the notes in order.

03 LOVE OF MY LIFE **THROUGHOUT** TECHNIQUE: FINGERSTYLE ACOUSTIC bit.ly/tg381audio

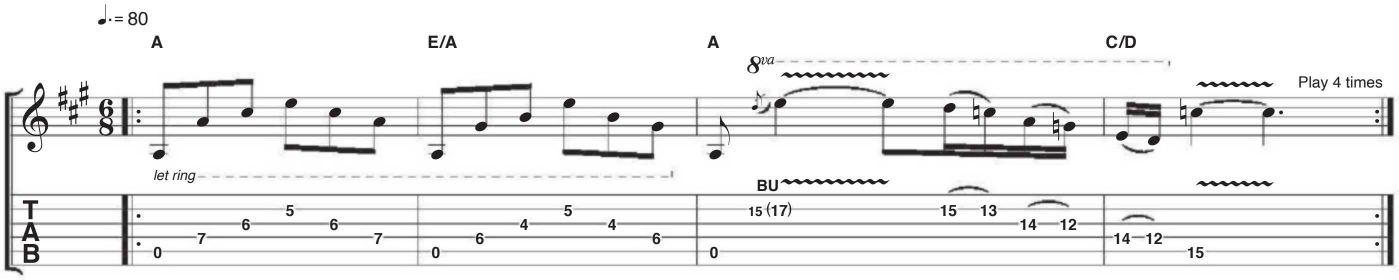


The original track is primarily piano-led. However, in live shows, Brian typically expands on the acoustic part heard in the recorded intro to provide guitar accompaniment to vocalist Freddie Mercury and, later, Adam Lambert. We're showcasing the fingerstyle technique here, so pay attention to the pima instructions under the tab which tell you the relevant fingers to use.

PIMA DIRECTIONS

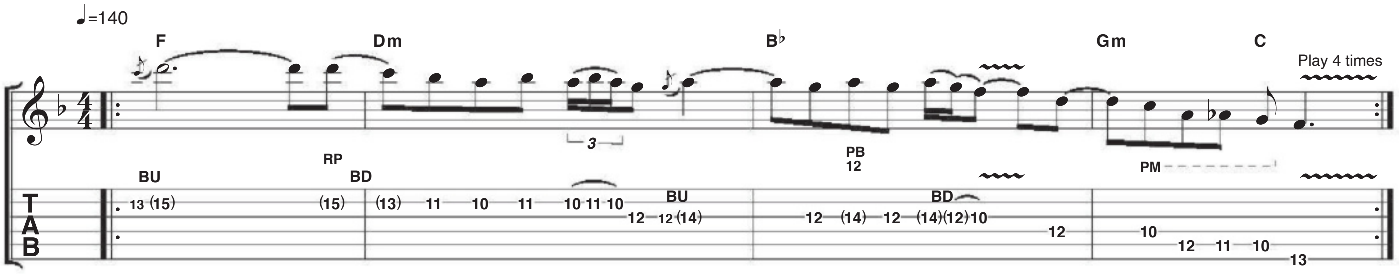
Whether you're playing our short example or tackling a full tab of a live performance of Queen's song, you'll need to get to grips with fingerstyle. The basic principle is to use your thumb (p) for the three bass strings, and your index (i), middle (m) and ring (a) fingers for the top three strings respectively. The little finger (c) is supposedly rarely used, at least according to 'classical' technique. But you're free to make any practical adjustments to pick anything you need to – including making use of the pinkie!

04 WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS CHORUSES CHANGING FROM RHYTHM TO LEAD bit.ly/tg381audio

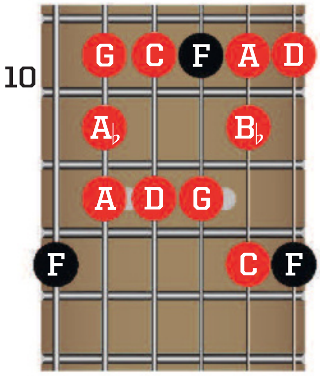


With Queen being a one-guitar band, Brian frequently needs to seamlessly switch between rhythm and lead guitar parts, often in a 'question and answer' style with the vocal – and *WATC* is a great example, featuring a patchwork of arpeggios, heavy chords, riffs and lead lines artfully stitched together. Take care here in our riff as we switch from arpeggios to soloing. You might want to kick in a little overdrive midway through, too.

05 DON'T STOP ME NOW SOLO TECHNIQUE: BENDS, PRE-BENDS AND SLURS bit.ly/tg381audio



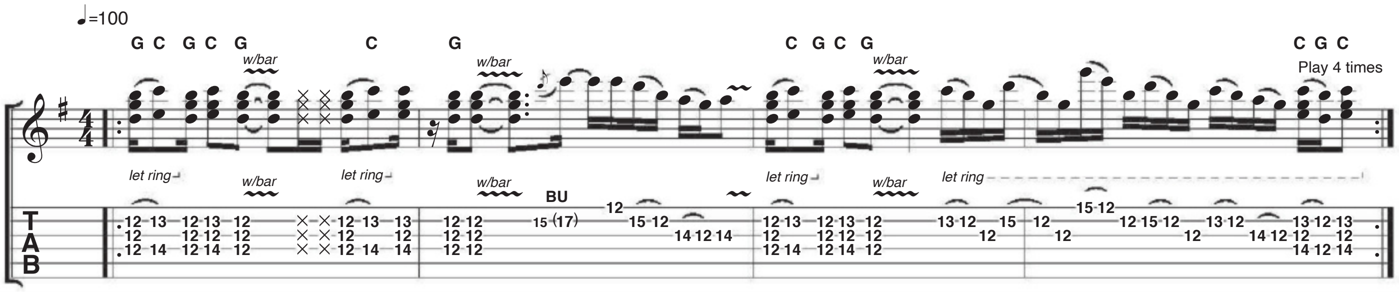
Like the original, our *DSMN*-inspired lick is in F major and uses bends and pre-bends (plus brief hammer-on/pull-off slurs) to make the melody more vocal-like. As you bend the string, listen closely to each one to ensure perfect tuning and take note of your hand position so you can apply it to the pre-bends (which, remember, you don't hear until it's too late and you've already bent the string!).



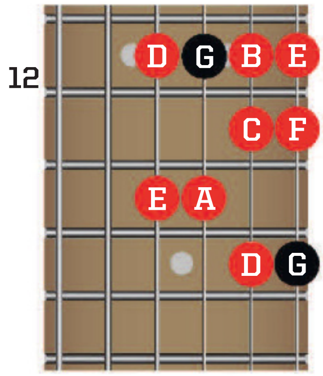
F MAJOR BLUES SCALE

Play the sixth-string root note with your fourth finger and use your first finger to play the notes on the 10th fret, employing one finger per fret to complete the shape. This is essentially an F major pentatonic scale (F G A C D) with added 4th (B♭) and ♭3 (A♭) intervals which Brian uses to add melody.

06 WE WILL ROCK YOU OUTRO TECHNIQUE: I-IV CHORD CHANGE bit.ly/tg381audio



The iconic *WWRY* guitar solo features one of Brian's signature chord changes (he also employs it in *Hammer To Fall*, for example), which starts with a first-finger barre, followed by a second- and third-finger hammer-on. It gives a quick change between two major chords (G to C here in our example), but it can be moved to any key by shifting the shape up and down the fretboard.

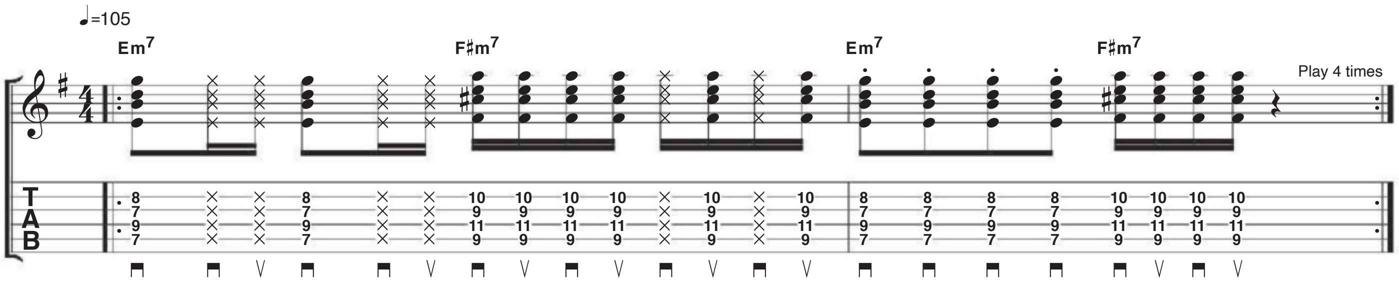


G MIXOLYDIAN MODE

In *WWRY*'s solo Brian plays melodic licks in and around his chord change. So, instead of playing every note of G Mixolydian one by one, here, keep a first-finger barre at the 12th fret and use your other fingers to target the other notes as you please.

07 ANOTHER ONE BITES THE DUST VERSES 2 AND 3 TECHNIQUE: FUNK RHYTHM 16THS

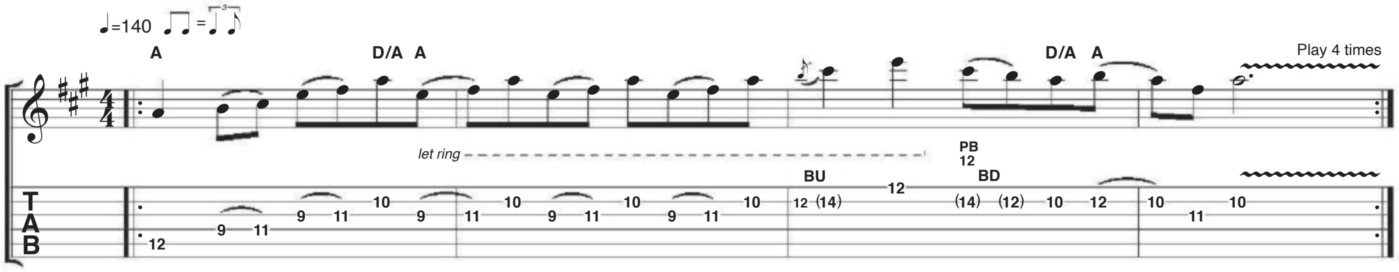
bit.ly/tg381audio



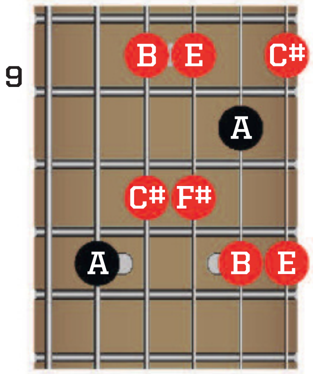
John Deacon's two-chord Stratocaster funk vamp is a super-tight 16th-note groove. That means you'll be playing with constant alternating down and upstrokes while varying the pressure of your fretting fingers to play full chords or muted sounds. We've kept things simple for you, using the same shape for two chords. Note that John's original part changes to a 5th position Am and is a little more complex.

08 CRAZY LITTLE THING CALLED LOVE SOLO TECHNIQUE: ROCKABILLY LEAD

bit.ly/tg381audio



We're aping Brian's rockabilly stylings here in our shuffle-feel lick. Say "Humpty Dumpty, Humpty Dumpty" to roughly approximate the timing of the shuffle – or listen to our audio, of course. Once you've got the idea, try applying this to the notes in the tab. Take care not to rush the hammer-ons. You can easily lose the shuffle feel if you are not careful.

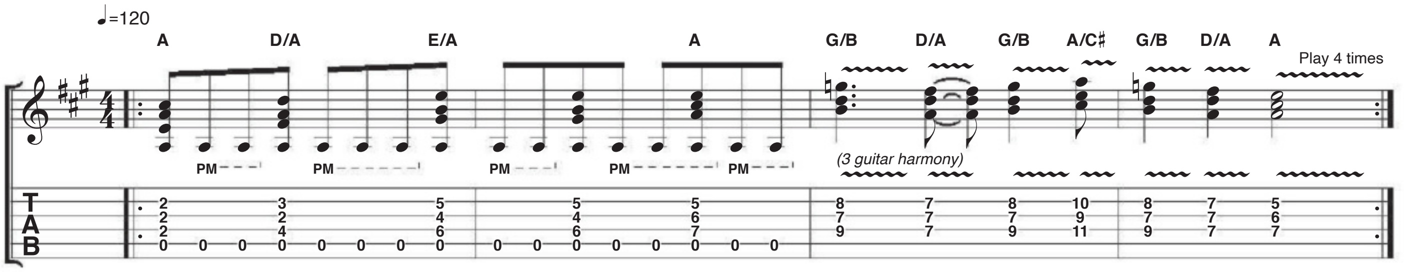


A MAJOR PENTATONIC SCALE

Our lick is played over an A major backing and the country/rockabilly harmony owes a lot to the bright sound of the major pentatonic scale (1 2 3 5 6) used here. Use the fourth finger to play the root note on the 12th fret, and a one-finger-per-fret style for the remainder of the shape.

09 FLASH SOLO THROUGHOUT TECHNIQUE: HARMONISED LICKS

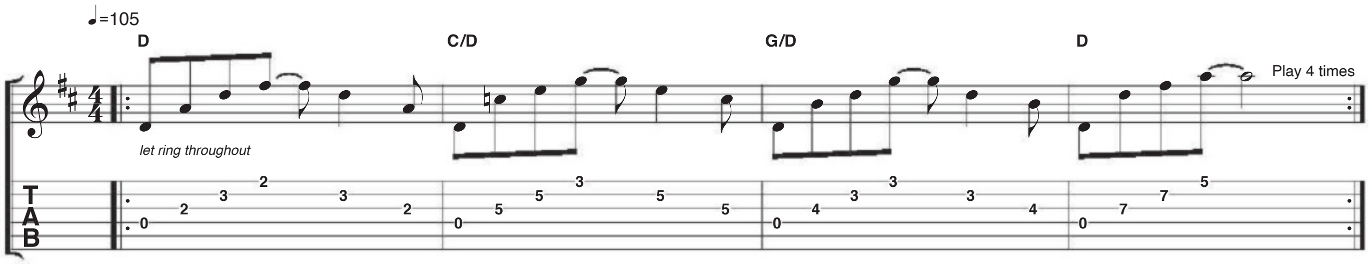
bit.ly/tg381audio



"Flash, ah-ah! Saviour of the universe!" ...And we all know what comes next: Brian's signature harmonised guitar lines, which is what we're looking at here. Bars 3 and 4 show a three-guitar harmony with each guitar assigned to its own string. Essentially, this arrangement is the same as playing triads, but the added vibrato and stereo panning creates a beautiful, singing harmony that sounds totally different from the chordal approach.

10 UNDER PRESSURE THROUGHOUT TECHNIQUE: ARPEGGIOS

bit.ly/tg381audio



Brian very often uses triad shapes on the higher strings, which perhaps stems from his earliest days of learning chord shapes on the ukulele before picking up the guitar, and *Under Pressure* features this style of playing throughout. The triads here in our simpler example are from the D Mixolydian mode (D E F# G A B C) and are played as slash chords over the open D root note.

11 A KIND OF MAGIC SOLO TECHNIQUE: FAST LEAD RUNS

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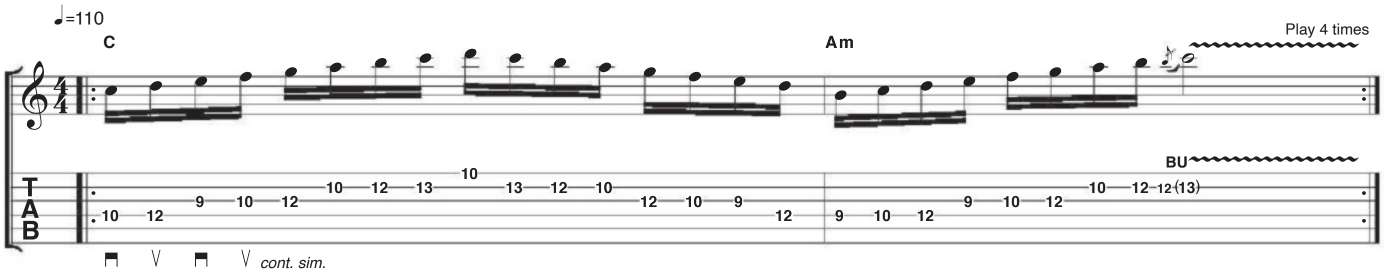
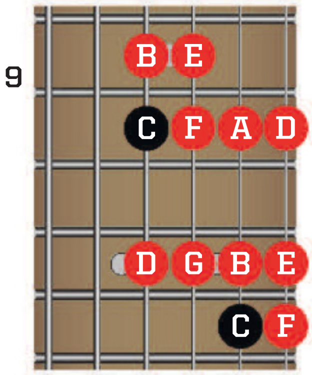


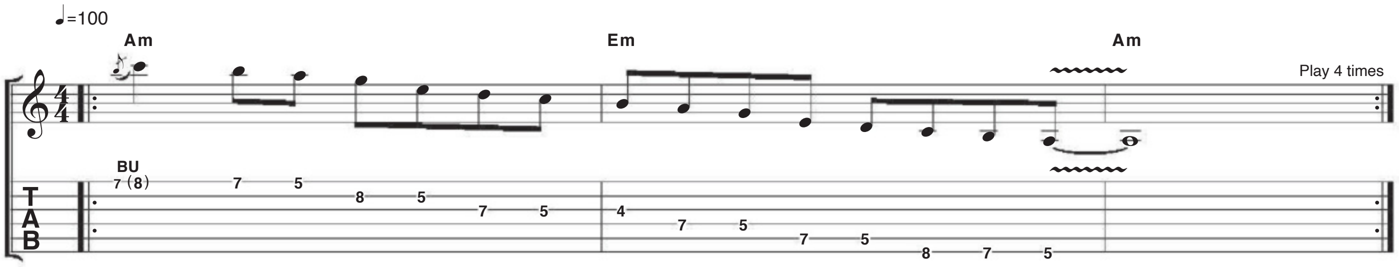
The 16th-note runs in *AKOM* are some of the slickest lead lines Brian ever recorded. Turn to p68 to learn them in our full transcription, or ready yourself with this shorter idea here. Based in C major, ascend and descend the lick evenly using down-up-style alternate picking. It's quite relentless stuff, so we recommend attempting just four or eight notes at first, looping each phrase to build accuracy. Make sure to start slowly, too!



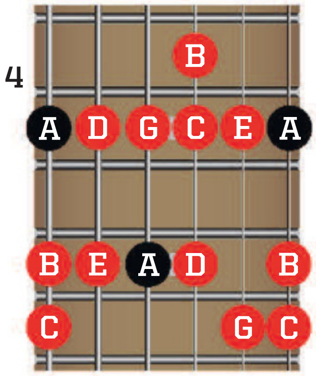
C MAJOR SCALE

A simple C major scale it may be, but this shape comes with its own challenge: a position change as you reach the second string. You only have to move up one fret, though, so it's not too bad. Just take it slowly, playing from low to high at a slow enough tempo that you don't make mistakes.

12 THESE ARE THE DAYS OF OUR LIVES SOLO TECHNIQUE: TIMED DELAY EFFECT bit.ly/tg381audio



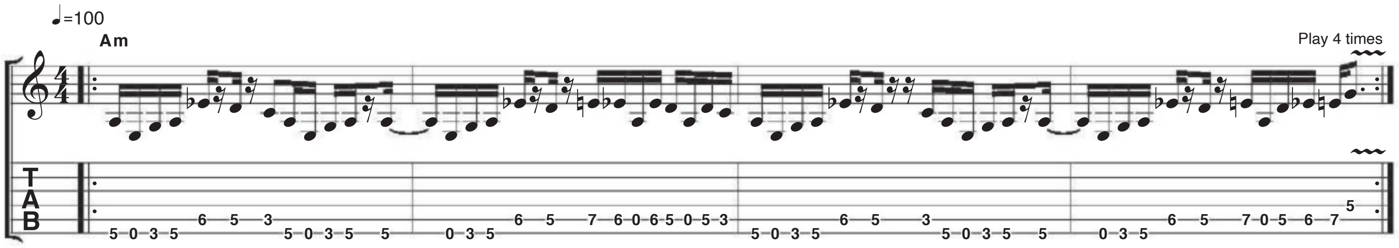
Here, we're looking at Brian's approach to the cascading licks in this beautiful song's emotive solo. You'll be descending through the scale using even eighth notes until you arrive at the A root note. The all-important delay effect is added with the repeat set to a quarter-note (600Mms at this tempo). This has the effect of a harmony being created between the played note and the delayed note.



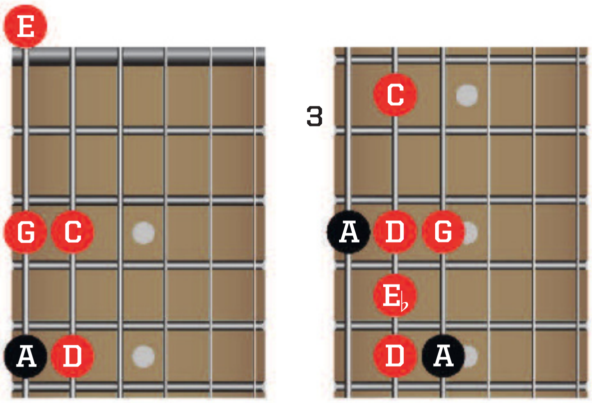
A MINOR PENTATONIC SCALE WITH ADDED 9TH

This scale shape is based on the traditional A minor pentatonic (A C D E G) with the root on the sixth string. Added to this is the 9th interval B note resulting in a hybrid six-note scale, somewhere in between the pentatonic and natural minor scales.

13 DRAGON ATTACK MAIN RIFF TECHNIQUE: SINGLE-NOTE FUNK LINES bit.ly/tg381audio



This riff, inspired by Brian-penned funk-rocker *Dragon Attack*, is played in unison with the bass and features syncopated 16th-notes to create the groove. Keeping your picking hand moving constantly in a down-up, 16th-note fashion will really help you stay locked in with the bass and drums.

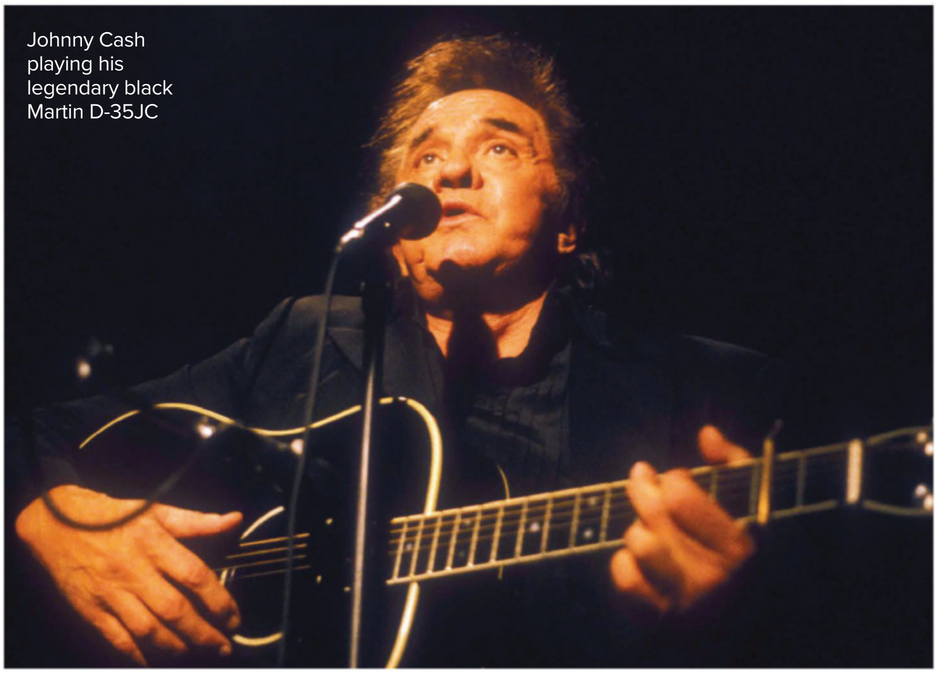


A BLUES SCALE

Our riff is based in the A blues scale (A C D E♭ E G), with the notes arranged on the lowest strings and using the open E and A notes as pedal tones.

JOHNNY CASH

This month Stuart Ryan checks out the simple but powerful 'pick and strum' style of the original outlaw country star, the fabled Man In Black.



Johnny Cash playing his legendary black Martin D-35JC

ABILITY RATING

Easy

Info	Will improve your
Key: E Major	✔ Strumming rhythm
Tempo: 109 bpm	✔ Chord changes
https://bit.ly/422PgWq	✔ Picking out bass notes

Think of country music and it's hard not to conjure up an image of the legendary 'Man In Black', original outlaw country legend Johnny Cash. His warm bass-baritone voice and relaxed yet tight strumming patterns are immediately recognisable and laid the foundations for country rhythm guitar in the decades that followed. His mournful songs of heartache, struggle and trouble put him alongside Hank Williams on the pedestal of country fame. Growing up in Arkansas in the 1930s Cash started his working life in cotton fields at the age of five and would have learned the tradition of the 'work song' from an early age singing along with his family and fellow workers. Guitar lessons came courtesy of his mother and a friend and by age 12 he was already writing songs.

After a spell in the army Cash set out on his musical career in the early 1950s with the 'Tennessee Two', guitarist Luther Perkins and bassist Marshall Grant. Perkins' country/rockabilly lead style married perfectly with Cash's more traditional stripped back, strumming-based accompaniment and although they started off performing gospel music soon they took on rockabilly as their main sound.

Listen to Cash staples like *Folsom Prison Blues*, *I Walk The Line*, and *Ring Of Fire* (actually written by June Carter and Merle Kigore) and you'll hear Cash's simple yet effective rhythm guitar parts at play. Driving, tight and often percussive he locked in with the snare to create a big sound that heralded the arrival of a harder approach to country music. Perkins' lead guitar and fills were given the perfect foundation in Cash's driving acoustic playing.

Cash's rhythm playing initially seems simple, as there are open chords and a basic strumming pattern. There are challenges though, and while the alternating basslines that punctuate each chord seem straightforward, hitting the correct bass string each time is harder than it seems. His style demands a relaxed strumming hand and an even dynamic on each strum – lose control here and your playing will be all over the place dynamically, and rhythmically. You also need stamina to keep this part going so try playing this chord sequence for five minutes and see if any fatigue sets in on the strumming hand. This piece follows the classic Cash strumming sequence of '1 and 2 and a 3 and 4 and a'. Try the following pattern for this type of strumming – 'down down down down up'. You almost want to view yourself as a percussive instrument when playing in this style, as if you are an extension of the drum kit. This style is ruthlessly efficient as a practice tool – put the metronome on or record yourself with my backing track and you may find some crucial timing issues are exposed. Simple isn't always as simple as it seems. Be sure to check out the video accompaniment for this lesson, courtesy of our friends at Guitar Techniques, at bit.ly/422PgWq .

Get the Tone

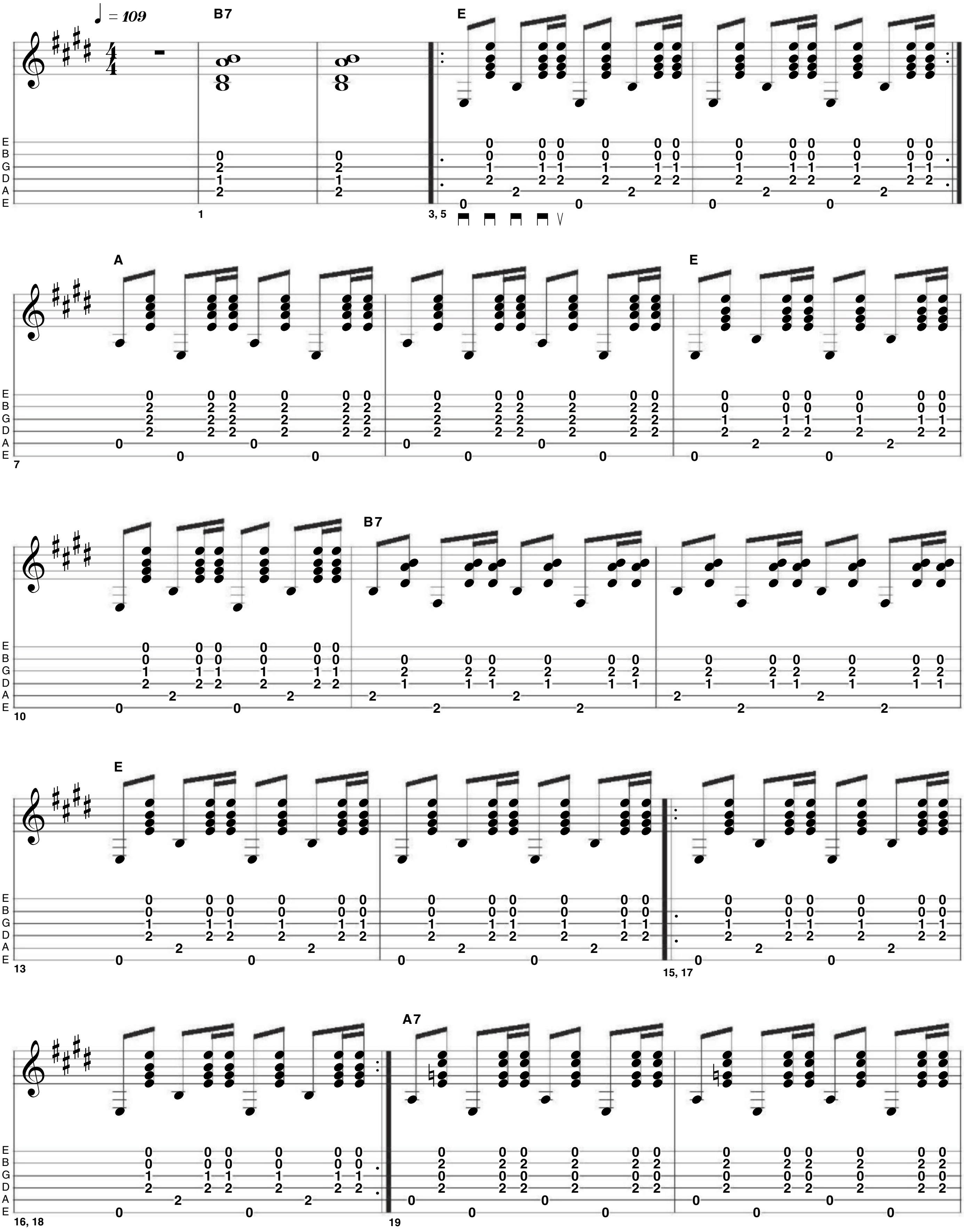
There's no getting away from it, an American classic is first choice for this strumming style, and a big one at that! Of course, any acoustic will suffice. Cash was most often seen with Martin dreadnoughts – D-28 and D-35 mainly, though he also played Gibsons and could be seen with a J-200 in the late 1950s. I recorded this on a Martin Custom Shop Expert 1937 D28.

MEDIAPUNCH INC / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

TRACK RECORD To really hear the raucous side of Cash's country guitar style check out the legendary live albums, Johnny Cash At Folsom Prison (1968) and Johnny Cash At San Quentin (1969), where Johnny and Luther hold it together brilliantly under testing conditions. At the other end of the spectrum listen to American Recordings (1994) with producer Rick Rubin, where we see Cash's more vulnerable side.

STUDY PIECE JOHNNY CASH

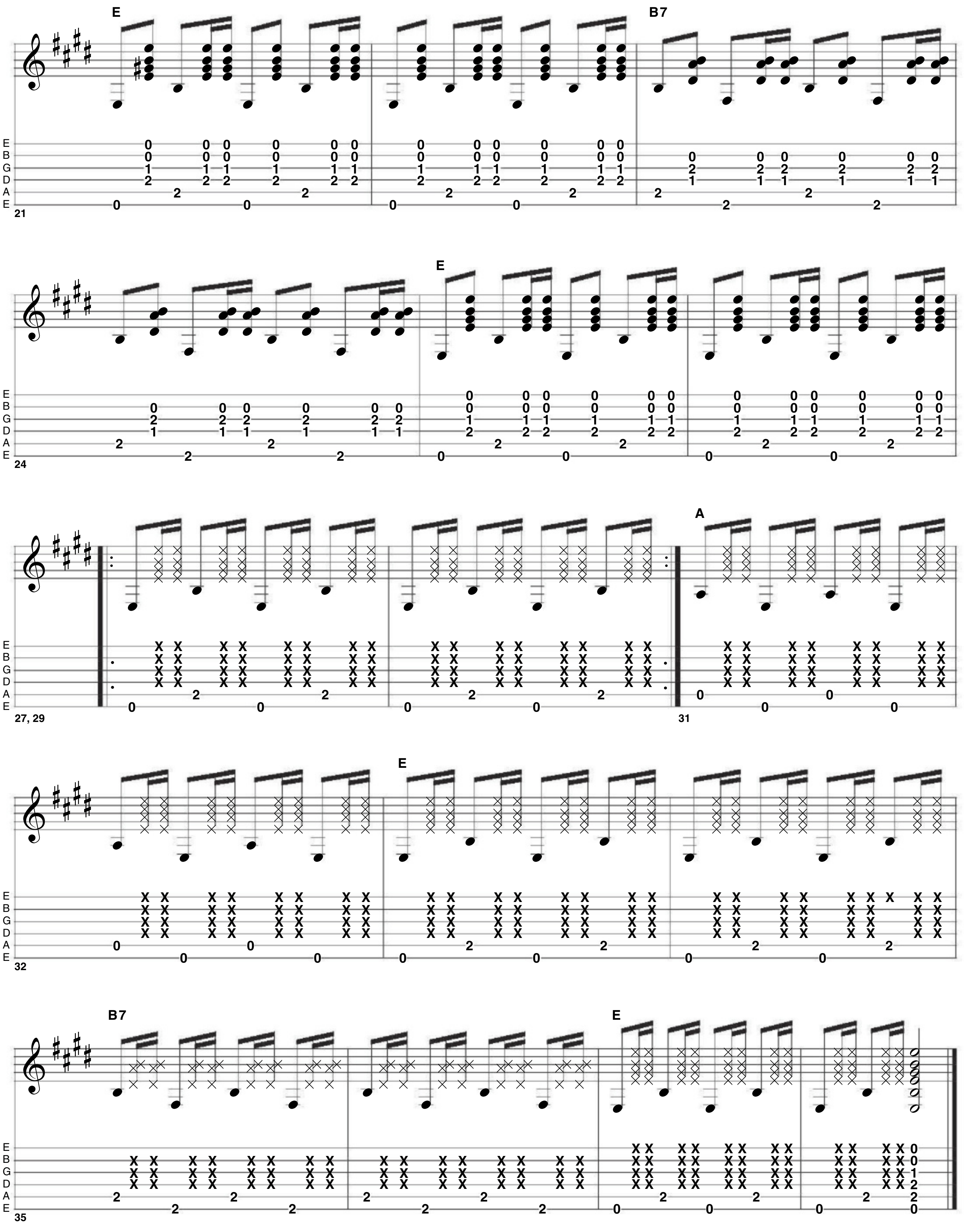
Bars 1-16: Cash added interest to chords with his 'boom-chick' alternating bassnotes in between strums. A relaxed strumming hand gives each down and upstroke equal force so the part doesn't sound uneven. From bar 7 the bassline moves from a sixth to fourth-string pattern on the E Major chord to a fifth to sixth-string pattern. There are two main basslines played on chords like this: root/5th and root/3rd or a combination of these. Here we are using root/5th.



VIDEO & AUDIO https://bit.ly/422PgWq

STUDY PIECE JOHNNY CASH

Bars 17-34: Cash's acoustic rhythm 'trick' was to mute the strings to emulate the sound of a snare drum or a train on the tracks. To do this either hold the chord shape in place and release the pressure on the fingers before striking the strings, or rest a finger across the strings to mute them - the third finger works well here.



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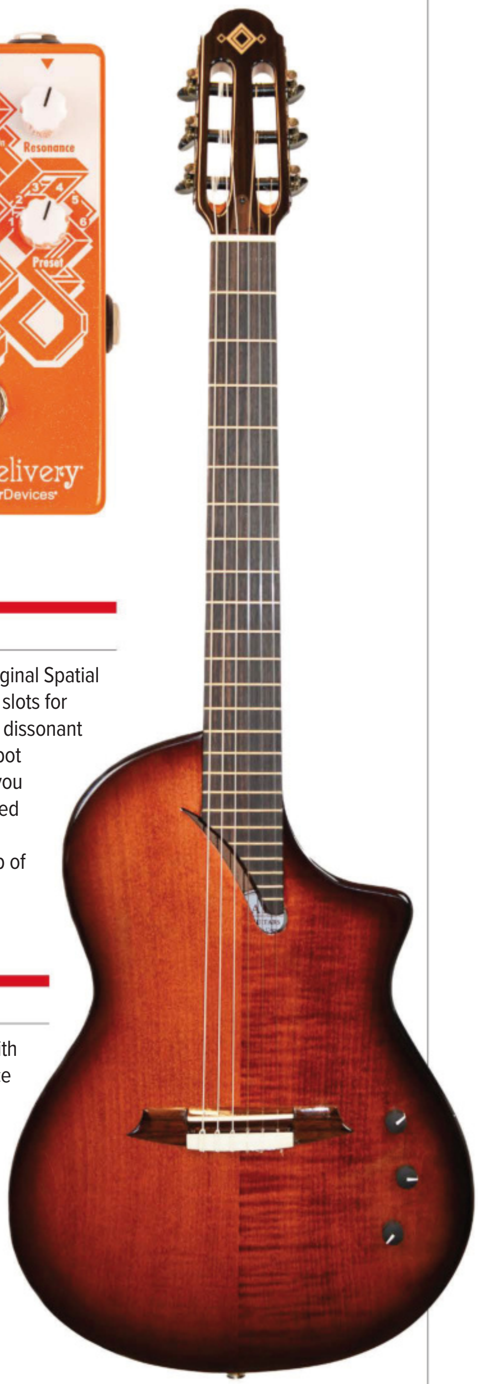

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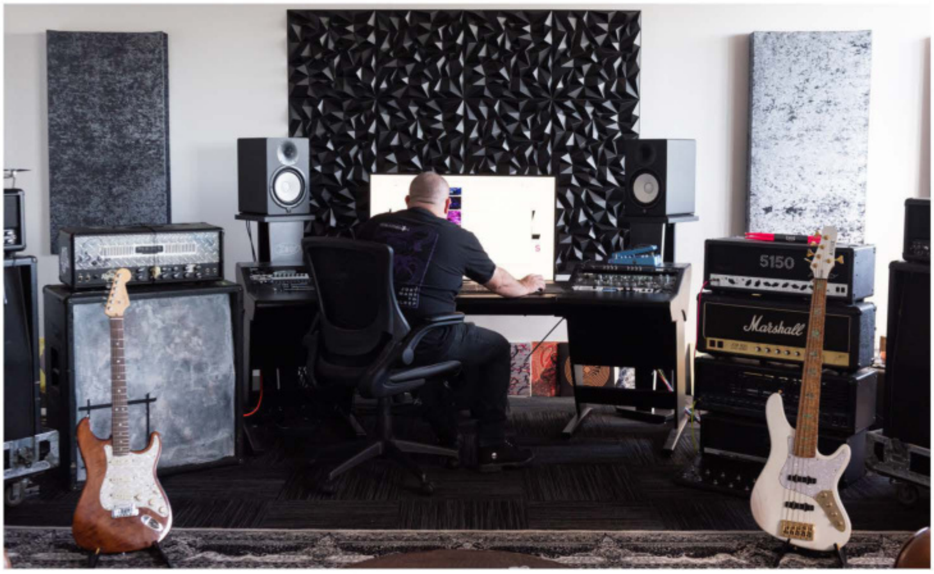
AUSTRALIAN STUDIO PROFILE: UNREIL STUDIOS, NSW

In an occasional series, AG profiles the nation's recording spaces, of all shapes and sizes.

Situated in the Sydney suburb of Rouse Hill, Unreil Studios is less a dedicated recording studio, and more a meeting point for local musicians offering rehearsal space, recording facilities and a retail outlet. Opened in December last year, operator Andrew Hogarth envisioned Unreil as "a space and platform to support Australian artists". In other words, it's not strictly a recording studio, nor strictly a rehearsal space, nor strictly a "shop": it's all of these things at once, as well as a mini museum of sorts by dint of the gear it has in its inventory, including instruments once beloved by Dave Grohl, Wes Borland, Josh Homme and Adam Jones, among others. And yeah: there's a cyclorama as well.



The rehearsal room has recording facilities - what kind of gear is available?

The rehearsal room is set up like a stage so bands can get a feel for how they would be placed at a show. We have a Pearl Masters kit mic'd up with Earthworks Audio microphones, three Shure SM58 vocal mics, a Marshall JCM2000 50W half stack, a Engl Ritchie Blackmore 100W half stack, an Ashdown 300 Mag bass head into an SWR Henry 8x8 bass cab or Marshall 4x12 bass cab. All three rigs have Two Notes Torpedos setup on them which, along with everything else in the rehearsal room, runs into a Behringer X32 digital mixer. This all then comes through a 3400W Yamaha PA System with two loudspeakers and two fold back speakers.

Unreil has quite a few impressive collectible items, for example the Maton Mastersounds used by Josh Homme in the mid 2000s. How did you come into possession of that?

The story with this particular guitar is that Josh Homme put it up for sale on his eBay account where it was acquired by Rohan Hayes of I Built the Sky / Sunk Loto. Unreil worked with I Built the Sky for their Australian and England tour in 2023 and during this time acquired this guitar from Ro. It can be seen used by Josh Homme in the 2005 AOL Sessions where he is playing 'Burn the Witch' with it.

Likewise the Foo Fighters touring Mesa rigs. What's the story there?

When Unreil Studios was first being planned out, I wanted to get some unique gear for the collection and came across Analogr in LA, which is a historical music collection auction house. I spoke with Tom and Francis about some items they had at the time and I ended up bidding on and winning the Stage Left and Stage Right Mesa rigs setup that Foo Fighters toured with. It was also kept at Studio 606 for a while.

Are there any unique challenges running a space like this in north-west Sydney?

There are actually a lot of bands around this area, and I'm meeting in person or talking online to new bands every week, so at the moment for me it's just wanting to get the Unreil Studios name out there further so people can see it's a genuine goal of mine. I've met some great people so far since starting up who have given me support and good feedback so I just want to keep that good vibe going as much as possible within the Australian music community.

What are future plans for Unreil?

Apart from having a space that artists can come to for their projects, I am looking at growing the support side of the studios to be able to assist bands further with what we provide, I would love to be able to help bands with some touring and recording costs, merchandise and equipment, and anything else that comes up for a band on the go to help them go that bit further and know they have some support along the way.

For more info on standalone rates and membership, check out unreilstudios.com.au

PHOTOS: ANGUS LEWRY

10 THINGS TO KNOW BEFORE…

RECORDING YOUR BAND

There are many ways to record your music, and you don't have to be in a traditional studio environment to get good results. Words by **Matt McCracken**.

Capturing musicians playing together can reap great rewards in terms of dynamics and practicality, and showcase your band's chemistry together. Here's our 10-step guide to getting started with it.

GET THE RIGHT GEAR FIRST

As well as your instruments and amps, you'll need a laptop capable of running DAW software such as Cubase, or if you're old-school, a multi-track Portastudio. You'll also need an interface that can take multiple XLR inputs; eight would be ideal to cover amps, drums and room mics, too.

With that in mind, you'll also need plenty of XLR cables, and it's worth labelling them with each source (eg, Guitar Amp 1) so the signal paths don't get confusing.

Dynamic mics for amps are a must, as is a set of condenser and dynamic mics for the drums. If possible, an extra condenser or two to use as ambient mics is useful for capturing more of the overall sound of the band in the room.

You might decide to DI some sources, too; bass and acoustic amps are prime candidates, as they often feature XLR outputs. Also, bring spare strings, patch leads and guitar cables, because you never know!

PREPARE

Before setting up to track your band, make sure you choose a song, or songs, to record that you can play consistently well live. You're going to be capturing the instruments live and while you may leave solos and vocals for a separate session, you need to nail your live parts and make sure the band dynamic and tone is as good as can be.

Having a friend who can engineer is useful, as it allows you to focus on your performance and speeds up the process of checking levels, and starting/stopping recording. Next, you need to choose your location. It could be your usual practice room or even a village hall, but you'll need enough space to position your band and not have excessive unwanted reverb…

POSITIONING THE BAND

Because you'll be using mics to record the instruments, 'spill' or 'bleed' is inevitable between them. This is when the instrument on one mic is picking up the sound of another. It tends to happen less with the close mics you'll have on amps, but the drums are a loud instrument and spill from them is likely.

Because of this it's advisable to record your vocals in a separate session rather than have a sensitive condenser mic picking up the other instruments as well. You can minimise bleed between the other instruments by positioning musicians in a semi-circle or horseshoe shape so they're spaced out from each other but still close enough to communicate but amps aren't facing each other where they could cause feedback.

DRUM MIC'ING BASICS

Using a four-mic setup for the drums to capture clean sound, start with the overhead mics first. These capture the sound of the kit being played in the room and help produce a clearer cymbal sound.

Start by positioning them six feet above ground level and aimed down at the kit. It's vital that they are equal distances from the kit to avoid mic phasing (which happens when the sound is hitting

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"A SINGLE-MIC SETUP WITH THE MIC DIRECTED AT THE SPEAKER CONE AND ALMOST TOUCHING THE GRILLE CLOTH CAN GET YOU A GOOD SOUND, ESPECIALLY IF YOU TWEAK THE POSITIONING"

each mic at different times).

For the kick drum, the closer you position the mic to the batter head (the side that is hit) the more attack you'll get from the sound. You may also choose to place a pillow inside the kick drum as a muffler to reduce unwanted overtones and help give a punchier, less boomy sound.

For the snare, position the dynamic mic a couple of inches above and an inch from the edge of it. The further you move it away, the more room ambience you'll get. And to reduce the amount of hi-hat cymbal sound hitting the snare mic, make sure it's facing directly away from the hi-hat.

RECORDING GUITARS

Dynamic mics are rugged enough to cope with the high frequency sound pressure levels coming from amplifier speakers. A single-mic setup with the mic directed at the speaker cone and almost touching the grille cloth can get you a good sound, especially if you tweak the positioning, and it's important to monitor the effects on tone when you change the positioning; dead centre will be punchier, positioning to the edge adds a darker tonality.

When you've found your sweet spot, mark it with a cross of tape on your grille. If you have enough XLR inputs on your interface, you may want to add a condenser several inches away for more of an ambient element but make sure you engage the -10 decibel pad setting if it has one to help prevent clipping.

RECORDING ACOUSTICS

Though the ideal way to record your acoustic is with a condenser mic the potential for mic bleed would compromise the recording too much. But fear not, if you're an acoustic player you can still track live with the band by mic'ing an acoustic combo amp or using its DI.

Your choice of pickup and preamp comes into play here. If you want to give magnetic soundhole or piezo pickups more of the 'acoustic' sound of a mic'd guitar, carefully dialling in your tone with an onboard EQ or preamp pedal can reap rewards.

An acoustic in the mix with a band needs mids to stand out, though, and less of the bass you might dial in when playing solo. Inevitably, there's compromise involved.

TROUBLESHOOTING

When the live session is underway make sure all guitarists and bassist have a tuner pedal and constantly retune between takes. Why risk sabotaging your song before you've even played a note?

And once you start, if someone makes a significant mistake, be prepared to stop. You've got to give your best chance at a performance you can live with. This is where the extra pair of ears of the laptop engineer are especially useful; they might hear a problem with the performance or signals that you don't.

OVERDUB SESSION

You'll get the instrumental core of your song tracked in the live stage, but to take the pressure off, you may want to save solos for an overdub stage, using amp and effects modelling plugins to nail a take and tone that you're comfortable with.

But you may also choose to overdub parts to really add impact to your song's parts, such as adding ringing overdriven chords in the chorus. Think about how you can enhance it without losing that live energy you've captured.

VOCALS

When recording the live instrumental, remember to keep vocals in mind with your playing dynamics so when you add them, the musicians are already reacting to the parts where vocals will be, such as taking things down a notch with their playing when the first verse comes in.

For the singer, it's important that they try to keep that live dynamic in mind for their own recording takes, again using the interface and laptop setup. Get comfortable with the band recording and try some run-throughs before even touching that record button; this will serve as a warm-up for vocal cords that should make tracking easier in the long run.

It's very important that the vocalist is comfortable in the recording space so make sure they're singing up to the condenser mic to open their vocal chords and ensure they have a monitor mix of both their vocal level and the song that they're happy to sing with. Add the kind of effects that you would use post-recording for this monitor headphone mix; reverb can really help a singer's performance as opposed to a dry uninspiring signal, in the same way as it does for a guitarist.

GOOD FOUNDATIONS

Listen back and critically evaluate all the takes you have as a band before moving forward to the mixing stage. If you get good takes at the live and overdub stages that reflect the dynamics of your song well, it makes mixing your song a much more straightforward process as you'll be reflecting what's already there.

That's one of the great things about tracking the bulk of a recording live; it helps capture the energy of musicians playing a song in a more organic way that can be harder to replicate by tracking all the instruments individually.

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Shure Aonic 50 Gen 2

With improved battery life, noise cancellation and a handful of new features, can the Shure Aonic 50 Gen 2 keep up with the pack?

Shure is a brand you'd more usually find mixing in pro-audio circles, with its wide and respected range of microphones, in-ear monitors and wired studio headphones. Artists from Led Zeppelin to Sheryl Crow have used the brand on stage and in the studio – but more recently it's been tempted to try its hand with a more mainstream audience. The Shure Aonic 50 Gen 2 are its third stab at a more consumer over-ear market, and are a pair of wireless noise-cancelling over-ears that ambitiously take on some of the established greats in this space.

The black-on-black design that Shure has opted for on the Aonic 50 Gen 2 looks very smart indeed, and you'd better like it too if you're keen on these cans – it's the only finish available.

The physical buttons do the usual, with an on/off/pairing button (and accompanying LED) – one for music control, a couple for volume and a three-position slider for adjusting noise cancellation. This is a little plastic-y feeling in use, while the adjustable headband also clicks loudly as you move it – something you might usually expect from cheaper headphones. But they otherwise feel relatively sturdy, and are certainly on the heavier side at 334g, but overall they don't feel too tiring to wear.

The feature set on the Shure Aonic 50 Gen 2 is a bit of a mixed bag, with some must-haves, a handful of nice-to-haves and a couple of real omissions. Let's start with the latter, and probably the biggest miss here is the lack of an official IP rating. That means these are not headphones you'll want to get caught in the rain with if you can help it, and we wouldn't recommend taking them to the gym either. There's also no wear sensor, something we usually like to see at this level.

However, battery life here is pretty impressive, and has been more than doubled since the last generation. You'll get a solid 45 hours from a single charge – a claim which rings true in testing, and easily bests its competitors, including Sony's WH-1000XM5 (up to 30 hours), the Bose QuietComfort Ultra Headphones (up to 24 hours) and Beats Studio Pro (up to 40 hours).

Charging is done via USB-C, but you can also use this port for wired music playback too – with support for playback up to 32-bit/384kHz files.

One of the new features this year is a Spatializer mode, which aims to bring more space and immersion to whatever you're listening to through some clever audio tweakery. There are three presets to choose from depending on the content you're listening to – Music, Cinema and Podcast – and, out of the box, the Spatializer setting can only be toggled on or off, or tweaked via the Shure Play control app.

The Music setting widens the soundstage and adds some space to instruments, Cinema removes some of that space but boosts the overall presentation for a more muscle-bound sound, while Podcast really focuses in on the mids, with a reduction in bass and treble, so the voices are – understandably – the star of the show.

Once inside the app, you can choose to change the slider controls to the Spatializer setting instead, but that will leave you with no on-headphone ANC control – so swap them out with caution. As for that noise cancellation – it's merely okay. It has been improved since the last generation, and now offers the ability to tailor the ANC level more specifically to your needs, but it's just not as capable as the very best in this space.

With ANC on, there's the choice of Light, Moderate, Max and MaxAware (which is supposed to balance noise cancellation with the ability to carry on conversations), and when you switch to Environment Mode, there's a slider in the app that allows you to tweak just how much of your environment you want to be kept in the loop with. Unlike some headphones, there's also the option to turn off noise cancellation completely should you wish. However, even in Max ANC mode, the noise cancellation simply seems to reduce noise rather than cancel out a whole lot – you don't get that deep silence that you'll get from the likes of Bose's QuietComfort range.

In each earcup there is a 50mm neodymium dynamic driver in charge of sound reproduction, with Bluetooth 5.2 on board for wireless playback and support for higher-res codecs like aptX Adaptive, aptX HD, Sony LDAC and Snapdragon Sound, if your source device supports it too.

The brand's studio reputation pulls into clear focus the moment you put the headphones on, with real attention to balance, precision and clarity. It's worth noting that you will get an overall better performance with the ANC switched off or set to a lower setting than Max. With it on, the soundstage becomes smaller, the bass response fattens up a little and dynamics are squashed, particularly through the mids and treble. Turn it off and your music will sound like it's got a new lease of life, which is worth considering when choosing how to listen to these headphones.

VERDICT

If you're looking for a pair of headphones that prioritise clarity and sonic balance over bass richness, the Shure Aonic 50 Gen 2 are well worth a look.

Pros:
- Great battery life
- Impressive high-res codec support

Cons:
- Noise cancelling isn't the best on the market

JANDS

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Fender Vintera II ’50s Jazzmaster, ’70s Jaguar & ’70s Competition Mustang

Impressive weird guitars for versatile players. Review by **Dave Burrluck**

The second collection of affordable vintage-era Fenders, the Vintera II range, was introduced last year and to say we were impressed with the ’50s Telecaster and ‘60s Stratocaster is an understatement. But could we get our hands on the new trendy offset models? Not until now.

While the first wave of Vintera offsets centred on the ‘60s, the second wave jumps either side with the ‘50s Jazzmaster and ‘70s incarnations of the Jaguar and Mustang and style aside, the primary changes are the switch back to rosewood fingerboards from pau ferro, a pickup upgrade across all the models and, yes, a slight price increase.

It’s quite remarkable how these offsets are not only cohesive designs but how different they are in looks, feel and sound, too. Plus, although we have a ’50s Jazzmaster alongside a ’70s Jaguar and Mustang, we’re not comparing different decades or styles of manufacturing – a leveller that makes a contemporary comparison of ‘vintage’ Fender designs that much more interesting.

So, while the Jazzmaster retains the classic ‘long’ Fender scale length of 648mm and fret complement of the Telecaster and Stratocaster, the Jaguar and Mustang both drop down to a shorter 610mm scale with an extra 22nd fret. It’s a fundamental change that noticeably affects both the feel and sound, and aside from copies, we can’t recall any other-brand electrics that use this scale length today. Historically, of course, the Mustang was also originally offered with the even shorter 572mm scale like the single-pickup Musicmaster and dual-pickup Duo-Sonic, although from the introduction of the Mustang in 1964 those models were also offered with the longer 610mm scale.

Both the Jazzmaster and Jaguar, of course, share the same body outline, which is 42mm thick with its classic smoothly domed forearm contour, ribcage scoop and large edge radius. We can’t see any wood – or how many pieces are used – through the opaque finishes of either. The Mustang scrapes into the offset category courtesy of its waist and slightly offset base, and is slightly thinner in depth, closer to 39mm, again with the heavily radiused edges, lighter contouring and those more, well, Fender-like body horns. It’s little surprise, then, that the Mustang is the lightest of our trio at 3.66kg; the ’50s Jazzmaster is only a little heavier at 3.78kg and, although the same shape, the ’70s Jaguar tops out at 4.04kg, something that actually reflects – we’re sure unintentionally – the often lighter stock used in the ‘50s as opposed to the often heavier wood of that later period. If weight bothers you, it’s worth checking.

Obviously, as era-correct replications there’s no modern fashionable rounding of the body heel (it’s square edged), and all use the classic neckplate and four-screw attachment. The actual neck pockets appear pretty tight fitting, too. To be picky, there’s some slight sideways movement of the neck on the Jaguar, but that’s fixed with a tightening of screws.

We’d expect all the maple necks here to be slab-sawn where the end grain is parallel to the headstock face. In fact, both the Jazzmaster’s and Mustang’s end grain is diagonal, what Fender calls ‘rift sawn’. Aside from the larger ‘70s headstocks here, both the rosewood ’boards are slab-style and unbound, unlike the black-bound maple of the ’70s Jaguar with its large black plastic block inlays. The Mustang’s dots are larger in diameter than the Jazzmaster’s, and the dual 12th-fret dots are placed slightly closer together. All three use the original ‘small’ fingerboard radius of 184mm, each has body-end truss rod adjustment, and each uses the same narrow-tall fretwire.

Our three guitars advertise slightly different neck profiles – and dimensionally, though close, reflect some very subtle differences. Still, probably due to the lightly tinted polyurethane gloss of the neck back, there’s more commonality than you might think. The narrow tall fretwire (measured at 2.08mm wide by 1.09mm high) isn’t particularly high, but the maple ’board of the Jaguar avoids that almost ‘fretless wonder’ feel of many from that period.

Probably the most polarising aspect of the Fender offset is the bridge and separate vibrato of the Jazzmaster and Jaguar. Today, there’s a whole industry of aftermarket ‘fixes’ for the original designs and there are plenty of tricks in terms of how you can set them up. We can easily debate the failings of the original design, but for many players that’s precisely the draw: the otherworldly resonance of the strings behind the bridge and the ability to bend them with some swoops from the light-feeling vibrato.

The lack of mass of the Jazzmaster/Jaguar bridge also plays its part in the offset sound here and many players actually prefer the sound and performance of the Mustang’s saddles, which aren’t individually height adjustable: the domed radius is created as the E-string pair has the smallest diameter, the G and D string pair the largest, with the B and A pair in between. These saddles also have quite a deep groove to hold the string more firmly in place. Then there’s the vibrato’s large string anchor block, which provides more mass.

The ‘trem-stop’ of the Jazzmaster/Jaguar bridge, when set correctly, will prevent up-bend and also keep you in-tune (ish) should you break a string. The arms simply push-fit, whereas on the Mustang vibrato you can set the swing tension of the Mustang’s arm, thanks to a small Allen key, or lock it in place.

None of the three bridges is fixed to the body, either. To allow them to ‘rock’ as the vibrato is moved, each has two legs that sit in circular metal ferrules sunk into the body and pivot on a sharp pointed screw that passes through each of those legs.

Each of our trio also uses split-post tuners, the ‘70s models with the ‘F’ logo backs, while the Mustang’s have plastic buttons. They use a single ‘butterfly’ string retainer on the top two strings, although, oddly, there’s no spacer on the Mustang’s tree, which means those top strings are pulled down behind the nut at a much steeper angle.

The Jazzmaster introduced the dual ‘rhythm’ and ‘lead’ circuit concept that has befuddled us guitarists for the past 66 years. It is, in fact, not that complicated and can be quite useful. The key lies with that two-position slide switch at the top tip of the one-piece scratchplate: pushing it in towards the neck you have the ‘lead’ circuit where the three-way toggle selects either or both pickups, and the volume and tone work as we all know. Easy. Move that slide switch away from the neck and you introduce the ‘rhythm’ circuit: the neck pickup only with its two thumb-wheel controls for volume (the upper wheel) and tone.

The later Jaguar uses pretty much the same dual-circuit concept, but instead of the lead circuit's toggle switch we get individual pickup on/off switches and the lower-placed 'strangle' switch, effectively a high-pass filter that attenuates the low-end. It also introduces the four-piece scratchplate where both circuits' controls are mounted on chrome-covered metal plates, as are those three lead circuit slide switches, leaving the more central piece as a plastic laminate. Style over substance? Well, the Jaguar's metal control plates do mean it's easy to investigate any wiring issues without removing the entire scratchplate and bridge as on the Jazzmaster, plus experiments with things such as capacitor types and values is loads easier.

Our Mustang has just one circuit and is the epitome of Leo Fender's modular approach to guitar manufacturing. Unlike the other two offsets, the pickups are suspended on the plastic scratchplate, as opposed to direct mounting to the body, and the bridge doesn't sit over it. Here, the two slightly angled black-covered single coils are each controlled by their own three-position slide switch. In the centre position the pickup is off, both outer positions are on, but if you engage the upper 'on' position of the neck pickup with the lower 'on' position of the bridge – or vice versa – they're out of phase.

There's another chromed metal control plate to hold the volume, tone and output jack, slightly smaller than the one used on the Jaguar. While the Mustang's metal and plastic 'plates line up perfectly, the Jaguar's rotary control plate is slightly misplaced and doesn't fit into the tortoiseshell as neatly as it should.

While many contemporary offsets simply borrow the outline, there's a lot more to these original recipes when it comes to their sounds. The Jazzmaster here is almost a shock after our reference Strats and Teles. It's definitely a Fender voice, but it's possibly excessively bright until you dial it in a little and pull back the metallic smash of the attack. Pulling back the volume and tone certainly rounds things out a little and there's some welcome depth to the attack, but it's all underpinned by not only the seemingly shorter sustain but the original fingerboard radius – and those pretty small frets make things less fluid than we're used to. The mix, the only hum-cancelling position on the guitar, is probably worth the experience on its own: definitely more Tele-like, but the high-end detail, not to mention a few light shimmers from the vibrato and with some added lashings of reverb, transports us back in time in quite glorious fashion. The rhythm circuit does nod towards the instrument's name, pulling back those highs a little more on the neck pickup only – but lounge-smooth it ain't.

Strapping on the Jaguar, it initially feels like a toy. We pretty much kept volume and tone full up and it's certainly got a darker voicing that's more Gibson-esque, if you like, but we have that different sustain and a fuller neck profile in higher positions, not to mention the slippery gloss feel of the fingerboard, which widen the differences. Here, though, the rhythm circuit really hits the old-school jazz mark, whereas on the Jazzmaster it's still a little scooped in the midrange in comparison.

The longer we play, the more the Jaguar works its magic, even though quick pickup changes require some dexterity and thought. If only we had that toggle switch! The extra 'strangle' switch is relatively subtle, too; it does clean up the low-end a little, but it seems more for occasional use than an essential feature.

Onto the Mustang and strapping on this model is even more odd than the Jaguar because, in combination with the shorter scale, its smaller body and lighter weight enhance the toy-like feel. To be honest, though, although the pickups are far from hot, if you live in a Tele and Strat world then the voicing here is more familiar. Selecting pickups is harder than on the Jaguar, and there's plenty of chance you'll accidentally mute the guitar or put the pickups out-of-phase. Still, while the sound is thinned, kick in something like an MXR Phase 90 and it's a beautiful shimmery voice; with some blunderous fuzz or some even quite metal distortion, it has bags of attitude, too.

The more we play, the more we get used to the feel and scale length. We preferred it in that regard to the Jaguar, even though the Mustang's vibrato is different: a light waggle here brings fast pitch change and you really have to use it carefully unless you're keen to alarm your audience and bandmates.

VERDICT

While spending time with this trio is definitely a time-warp jive, it reminds us just how 'out-there' these designs were at the time of release. There's character aplenty here, and a song or two to be found within.

- **Jazzmaster** Cleanly built repro of the first Jazzmaster with all its quirks in place; most Fender-like offset here with its full scale
- **Jaguar** Crisply built repro of later period Jaguar with expanded features; more jazz-like voicing from the rhythm circuit and shorter scale length
- **Mustang** Lightweight, more compact offset with the most Fender-like pickup voicing, plus out-of-phase potential; strangely alluring!

- **Jazzmaster** Bright voicing might need taming; the original 'board radius and small frets won't be for everyone
- **Jaguar & Mustang** Not everyone will enjoy the short scale or gloss-finished 'board with old-style radius and small frets; on the heavy side

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RRP: £$2,899

EVH Frankenstein Relic

One of the most distinctive electric guitars is back as another replica, but this time it's missing its main visual identifier. Double-cut eruption or paint job disruption? Review by **Stuart Williams**

Hands up if you've ever tinkered with guitar mods. We'd wager that at some point or other we've all singed our fingers trying to replace a scratchy pot, turned the air blue as the spring from a pickup screw flies across the room for the third time, or gingerly winced as we make a twist of the Allen key. The late Eddie Van Halen was one such tinkerer, except his 'bitsa' mongrel became his implement for dropping jaws and raising the bar, permanently.

You're most likely already very familiar with the Frankenstein, a guitar that completed Eddie's jigsaw of mind-melting lead work, telepathic rhythm abilities and groundbreaking manipulation of the instrument itself. Plus, it looked damn cool. "It wasn't a tape finish, I used tape to paint it that way," Eddie said in 2016. "I have no idea what possessed me to do that! I wish I did, but it's just one of those things. I have no fucking idea... and now I have a registered trademark on it."

The finish was just one element of the S-style guitar that Eddie was toting. Loaded with a single humbucker in the bridge position, there's been plenty of speculation as to what the original pickup actually was. "It's from a [Gibson ES-] 335. I painted [the 335] white because, of course, I fucked with that, too. But yeah, I yanked it out of there. I took the rear pickup out and it was really hard. I mean, I pretty much destroyed that guitar because you had the f-holes to get to the electronics. Man! Talk about a pain in the ass!"

Following years of homebrew replications by fans to incorporate the Frankenstein's many design points ('dummy' pickup, cavity-mounted switch, Floyd Rose, D-Tuna and so on), in 2007 Eddie teamed up with Fender's Custom Shop to build the first EVH-branded guitar. This came in the form of a dead-on 300-piece limited-edition tribute replica of the Frankenstein.

After we'd recovered from the shock of its price tag, along came the EVH Striped Series models. These import Eddie-style guitars came with a core of the Frankenstein's features – albeit in pristine condition – before the EVH brand brought out the Striped Series Frankie in 2020. This time, we got a heavy-relic addition of the Striped Series models, with greater attention to detail, bringing most of the Frankenstein's stand-out features to those of us on everyday budgets.

So that's it covered, then, the Frankenstein models are complete. Nope! Because here we have the Frankenstein Relic – a 'civilian' version of the Frankenstein that sees the basswood Strat body stripped of its stripes. In their place, there's a more understated, solid finish (available in three colour options: Red, White and Black), and given the name, there's no surprise that it's undergone some light punishment.

Elsewhere, everything is familiar and faithful to the EVH instrument blueprint. There's a quarter-sawn, graphite-reinforced maple neck, 22 jumbo-fret maple fingerboard with a 305mm to 406mm compound radius, a single EVH Wolfgang humbucker, a Floyd Rose and a D-Tuna. Also added to the guitar is the 'dummy' neck pickup we saw previously in the Frankie, as well as the 'dummy' five-way switch and custom cut-off scratchplate.

Why are we referring to it as 'dummy'? Well, that's what EVH calls it. But there's a twist: that dummy pickup isn't just a mute shell. It has wires fitted and neatly coiled (its DCR measures 6.8k), but they aren't connected to anything. Instead, they sit under the selector switch, which is screwed in place in the middle-position pickup cavity, and is also not connected. With our interests piqued a quick turn of the screwdriver reveals that the switch is, in fact, a Fender Pure Vintage model.

Under the scratchplate, there's a cavity tapering from 60mm at its widest point to 40mm at its narrowest, with around 33mm depth offering ample room for a full complement of controls. So, while we can't review it for 'what it could be', there is absolutely scope for adding to the format if you want to expand on the single humbucker and turn it into an HSS model.

We've experienced the EVH Wolfgang Humbucker on plenty of occasions before. It's punchy and obviously reacts well under higher gain settings, too, with harmonics sparking from the pick. The tinted neck looks the part (although our review model had some of the finish missing around the inside of the truss rod thumb-wheel recess), and compared with previous Frankensteins, we'd say that the finish adds a little friction, especially after you've been playing a while.

The neck profile is described as a 'modified C'. It's speedy but still has a slight chunk to it, and it's definitely not a super-modern shredder's neck. That's enhanced by the compound radius, which is noticeable but not overt, allowing for bigger bends without choking in the upper frets, even with our review model's fairly low action.

The Floyd Rose is installed flush, so you have the option to depress it until the strings are flapping like an optimistic emu. This is Eddie's preferred configuration; he insisted that the vibrato needs to be "all flush to the body. Everything needs to be connected...The more connection, the more sustain and resonance." The good news is that it returns to pitch and stays there effortlessly, and the addition of the D-Tuna is a handy one if you're regularly playing in drop D.

It's not often we give a shout-out to a volume pot, but if you're only going to equip a guitar with one (even if it is labelled 'tone'), then the EVH remains one of our favourites. It's fast, frictionless and allows for speedy violining effects to boot. The only criticism could be that its sensitive spin combined with its placement here might make it a little too easy to knock it by mistake, especially when reaching for the Floyd or palm-muting. But, as we've already noted, you could make use of those additional drill holes to move it.

guitar VERDICT

An EVH-themed guitar that has the potential to whisper 'Eddie Van Halen' rather than scream it. Apparently a leopard can't change its spots, but it seems Eddie's monster can lose its stripes.

An excellent playing and sounding 'classic' shred machine, bursting with plenty of useful features in Eddie's mould

You'll need to make some additions to really get the most out of it, but at least the neck pickup and switch are included

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PHIL BARKER

Sterling by Music Man St. Vincent Goldie

A streamlined take on one of the most exciting guitar designs in recent memory. Review by **Matt Owen**

RRP: $TBA

In 2016, Ernie Ball Music Man unveiled a guitar that was unlike anything else on the market – one so radical it's often cited as one of the most exciting guitar innovations of recent memory. That was the St. Vincent signature guitar, masterminded by Annie Clarke [aka St. Vincent herself] and debuting a new body shape. A more affordable version arrived from Sterling by Music Man soon after, but when an updated Goldie was released in 2021, guitarists began to dream once again. Enter the equally radical but comfortably more affordable Sterling by Music Man Goldie, which – at least on the surface – carries all the aesthetic flair and tonal appointments of its pricier sibling...

There are some tweaks worth stating for the record. Here, nyatoh has been used for the body rather than okoume, and the premium tremolo of the original has been swapped out for a standard alternative. A roasted maple neck returns, though it's topped with a rosewood, rather than an ebony, fingerboard. So, a fairly sizeable shake-up, but not one that has compromised the instrument's performance. In fact, those comparisons are almost unfair: this is a smashing guitar in its own right.

It's always strange getting to grips with an unfamiliar guitar shape, but the Goldie somehow doesn't feel unfamiliar. It's very narrow, but the contours make it a pleasing playing companion that doesn't feel brittle when balancing on your knee. Owing to the nyatoh, the Goldie is light and has a nice snappiness. Pair that with an impeccably profiled neck and 12"-radius 'board, and you've got all the ingredients for an exceptional instrument.

It's a fun little thing to noodle with unplugged, but, of course, its potential is capped without an amplifier. Indeed, if the guitar itself feels like lightning in a bottle; that electricity is unleashed when plugged in. Gold foil pickups have been a bit of a 'thing' recently, but these are certainly here on merit. It becomes a different animal with a little fuzz, and anyone familiar with St. Vincent's repertoire – or gold foils in general – will be well prepared for this trio. The cleans are nice, too, and the five-way switch offers an array of chime-y and sludgy sounds, but this guitar really sings with a little overdrive.

VERDICT

Stick the EBMM logo on the headstock and without a close-up inspection we'd probably be fooled. A must-try for fans of guitars that push the boundaries of instrument design.

Pros:
- Radical, aesthetically brill design that pays off
- Comfortable despite its looks

Cons:
- Middle pickup can get in the way of strumming
- 2/4 tuner design might not be for all

CMC MUSIC
Web: cmcmusic.com.au | Ph: 02 9905 2511

Guild Polara Kim Thayil

It took three decades, but the wait is finally over.
Review by **Darryl Robertson**

Kim Thayil is not just grunge royalty, he's one of the most influential guitarists of his generation. While Thayil may not be spoken about in the same breath as Eddie Van Halen or Jimmy Page, the Soundgarden great has had a huge effect on alternative rock. His masterfully crafted riffs and beautifully chaotic lead work would go on in part to define the Seattle sound and, in turn, inspire everyone from Alice In Chains to Nirvana, creating a sonic shockwave that is still felt to this day.

Grunge fans have been eagerly awaiting the release of a Kim Thayil signature since the Soundgarden axe-man helped breathe new life into this almost-forgotten model in the late '80s and early '90s. Now, while the project may have been plagued with bad luck over the last three decades, we are glad to see the partnership finally bear some fruit.

Inspired by Kim's prized '78 S-100, this guitar is simply stunning. Not only does this all-mahogany six-string wear its gilded gold hardware and jet-black getup well, but its attractive body style is as practical as it is handsome.

We found the Polara to be incredibly comfortable, and the build quality here is commendable. This guitar feels as solid as a rock and the chunky body means there's no neck dive for this double-cutaway. Speaking of the neck, Thayil has opted for a "vintage soft U" profile, which certainly has some girth to it. Okay, it's not as rounded as a vintage Les Paul, but it's substantial enough to satisfy fans of '70s guitars.

Importantly, the Polara feels just at home playing D-tuned sludgy riffs as it does wailing solos and everything in between. That's thanks in part to the unparalleled upper fret access. Just like a certain devil-horned Gibson, there's no note on this neck that isn't obtainable – this results in a truly inspiring guitar to play.

As you'd expect, this new guitar seeks to equip players with all the tones they require to nail Kim's signature sounds. The Alnico II loaded humbuckers are full, warm and pack plenty of punch – just the ticket for those aspiring to recreate the monstrous riffs from across Thayil's remarkable discography.

Turn down the gain and lighten your touch and this Guild will gift you shiny and sparkling cleans that are perfectly detailed and expressive. In the middle position, with the onboard phase switch engaged, the sound becomes noticeably thinner and more nasal – perfect if you want a lead line that cuts like a knife.

It's a given that this beautiful guitar can nail Kim's unmistakable tones, but the sheer versatility of the Polara should most definitely not be outshined by the name on the headstock.

VERDICT

The Guild Polara is an obvious choice for down- and de-tuned rock misanthropy, but this guitar is wonderfully versatile and supremely fun to play. It doesn't hurt that it looks the part.

- **Gorgeous from top to bottom, especially the gilded gold hardware**
- **Hugely versatile**

- **None**

ZENITH MUSIC
Web: zenithmusic.com.au/

Yamaha Pacifica Professional P12M

The Pacifica circles back to its pro roots, with pro results.
Review by **Paul Riario**

If there's one thing that's overshadowing the stellar Yamaha Pacifica Professional guitar, it's the startling price tag. It's difficult to shake the fact that the Pacifica — which many consider the benchmark in budget electric guitars — now arrives in a Professional version at a cost that might be slightly out of reach for most players. Even so, it would be a shame for that to be the only reason to overlook this thoughtfully designed Superstrat that undeniably proves it's a world-class performance instrument through and through.

The Pacifica model has been around for decades, but if you look back far enough, you'll find that its evolution was rooted as a pro-level, custom shop guitar that was built-to-order for top Los Angeles session players. So, in essence, Yamaha's Pacifica Professional is a welcome return to form as a premium instrument. If that sounds dubious, you can rest assured that the Pacifica Professional's build quality and specialized features are on par with top-notch boutique brands like James Tyler, Knaggs, Suhr and Tom Anderson.

"A welcome return to form as a premium instrument, the Pacifica Professional's build quality and specialized features are on par with top-notch boutique brands like James Tyler, Knaggs, Suhr and Tom Anderson"

First impressions are everything, and right off the bat, the guitar feels profoundly comfortable in your hands and rings out with a sizable resonance acoustically. A lot of that has to do with its precise Japanese craftsmanship and implementation of Yamaha's Acoustic Design technology — an advanced form of chambering that Brandon Soriano, marketing manager of the Pacifica line, elaborates on: "If you hear about chambering, you picture someone just taking chunks of wood out. This is different. We had scientists meticulously doing 3D modeling and mapping out how to shape the body and take certain parts out so that the whole thing resonates as freely as possible." And while this kind of exactness puts the Pacifica a cut above the rest, the perceivable standout comes in the form of the new Reflectone pickups in an HSS configuration (with a push-pull coil split at the tone knob). Yamaha partnered with Rupert Neve Designs, the company renowned for its pro audio recording consoles and preamps, to develop uniquely wound pickups that cover an exceptionally wide tonal response. The result is pickups unlike anything I've experienced before. Though it may sound like a fault, the Reflectone pickups lack coloration, but this is exactly what makes them extraordinary. What you get in return is supreme balance and an almost mastered, studio-quality polish between all the pickup positions on the five-way selector — or what Michael-Astley Brown, GW's online EIC, called a "pre-produced sound," and I completely agree. It's the kind of fully realized humbucker and single-coil tones that reveal the true nature of your tube amp or guitar modeler with clarity.

Of course, playability across the Pacifica Professional is exceptional, with every aspect being tangibly optimized for a balanced feel. Wrapping your hand around the maple neck, you'll find that its comfortably rounded modern "C" profile with a custom-tinted satin finish puts your playing in a confident position for fluid movement. For speed, a flat 10-14–inch compound fingerboard radius keeps notes from choking out as you sprint through the neck's 22 stainless steel frets. Even the generous beveled scoop along the Pacifica's alder body's lower bout and contoured neck heel allow for effortless navigation from top to bottom. For hardware, the Gotoh 2-point tremolo bridge combined with Gotoh locking tuners is a premium inclusion for steady vibrato throw and steadfast tuning, and even the smooth taper of the chrome volume and tone knobs make the whole guitar feel deluxe. As far as looks go, I love that the Pacifica Professional embraces its Japanese provenance. The colorful finishes are based on album covers of the Japanese City Pop genre that's inspired by the California music scene, which makes the guitar pop in bold colors.

In closing, some critics might say there's a stigma to it being a Pacifica; however, I'll counter that Yamaha's Revstar was a hidden gem until Matteus Mancuso adopted it as his primary guitar. Whether or not it takes a Mancuso to change that perception is irrelevant, because, for my money, the Pacifica Professional is an unparalleled instrument at all costs.

RRP: $3,499

guitar VERDICT

The Yamaha Pacifica Professional is the most sophisticated Pacifica to date. It's a flagship model with advanced chambering to enhance resonance, and cutting-edge pickups for a super clear and ultra-wide response that put it beyond any guitar in its class.

PROS
- Advanced chambering design maximizes the guitar's resonant qualities
- Rupert Neve Design Reflectone pickups offer an ultra-wide and clear tonal response
- Slim modern C neck shape and compound radius provide comfort and pitch-perfect bending
- Stainless steel frets will last for a lifetime of durability
- Rosewood or maple fingerboard

CONS
- Expensive

YAMAHA MUSIC AUSTRALIA
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EarthQuaker Devices Zoar Dynamic Audio Grinder

It's Zoar good. By **Paul Riario**

RRP: $229

What the hell is a Zoar? One quick Google search reveals it was a Biblical city — and that the name roughly translates to "little" or "insignificant." Now, I don't believe the folks at EarthQuaker Devices are biblical scholars; nor do I believe they intended to create a "little" or "insignificant" dirt pedal. But I'm pretty sure — judging by the illustrated hairy creature with claws of doom on the pedal's face — you're gonna need the Zoar Dynamic Audio Grinder when you're down on the killing floor.

EQD has been firing on all cylinders in sonic saturation with the recent releases of their Sunn O))) Life Pedal V3, Special Cranker and Blumes stompboxes that come loaded with colorful shades of fuzz, distortion and overdrive that can blow the roof off. And while the Zoar Dynamic Audio Grinder sounds like a gnashing, bloodthirsty animal, EQD's description of it — and I'm paraphrasing here — as a "medium-high gain discrete distortion" that utilizes transistors and eschews opamps and diodes to impart more viable touch-sensitivity for players, all sounds very tame and nuanced to me. Still, compared to the other dirt devices in EQD's stable, the Zoar appears to have the most tone-shaping capability with its six-knob layout for Level and Gain, Weight and passive EQ set of Bass, Middle and Treble. It all seems familiar except for the Weight control, which introduces additional low-end content and body into the circuit. Moreover, Weight also shapes the characteristics of the gain structure depending upon the type of guitar pickups employed, and where you land with the rest of the five dials on its highly interactive control set. The Zoar comes pedalboard-ready with top-mounted jacks, red LED indicator, a silent Flexi-Switch and 9- to 18-volt operation; and beneficially, running the Zoar at 18 volts yields crisper dynamics, enhanced clarity and quicker response.

Armed with a '59 Les Paul Historic and a Hendrix Strat, I ran the Zoar through my arsenal of classic amps, including a Fender Deluxe Reverb, a Matchless DC-30 and a Marshall Jubilee. As I alluded to earlier, the Zoar is less of a feral distorted beast and more of a domesticated drive with a broad range of fattened boost, crunchy speaker breakup and muscular distortion. Touch sensitivity is spot-on; whether you're heavy-handed or have a soft touch, your pick attack is accentuated dramatically. As far as the amount of gain found on the pedal goes, it's only after 3 o'clock on the Gain knob that the Zoar becomes crisply distorted and approaches fuzz (if you dial back the passive EQs), and if you push it this far, it sizzles like an overdriven Fender amp pushed to its limits. It's still a very detailed drive that doesn't get overly sludgy, and courtesy of its Weight control, you can add some walloping low-end punch to your tone. I also enjoyed getting the Zoar to sound very amp-like by cutting the Treble and boosting the Bass, Middle, Weight and Gain around 1 o'clock to achieve that wonderful base tone of a Marshall or Orange amp on steroids. In other words, the Zoar is a bit of a wild animal that's not overly ferocious; but it barks, it roars and it bites, and I'm keeping it as a pet.

"The Zoar is less of a feral distorted beast and more of a domesticated drive with a broad range of fattened boost, crunchy speaker breakup and muscular distortion"

VERDICT

The EQD Zoar Dynamic Audio Grinder is a dynamic distortion with amp-like character and an interactive EQ and Weight control that can sculpt varying degrees of boost, saturated overdrive and stabs of fuzz.

- Wide dynamic range of drive, from distortion to overdrive, fat boost to speaker breakup
- 9V and 18V operation
- 18V offers quick response and clearer dynamics

- No battery operation

YAMAHA MUSIC AUSTRALIA
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Donner/Third Man Hardware Triple Threat

RRP: $157

Jack White's label pulls off a brilliant budget collaboration. Review by **Art Thompson**

Combining three analog effects in a small package with a low price tag makes the Triple Threat an outsider among today's boutique boxes. However, it all makes sense considering that Jack White conceived this sleek little multi-effector for his Third Man Hardware line, partnering with Donner to produce the pedal in China.

Offered in standard black and limited-edition yellow finishes, the Triple Threat features distortion, phaser and echo effects that are arranged in right-to-left stompbox order, each of which can be controlled with a trio of small knobs. There's volume, gain and tone for distortion; level, rate and depth for phaser; and level, feedback (repeats) and time for echo. Yellow rubber surrounds on the knobs make them easy to grip and more identifiable on the black top panel. Even though they're close together, I didn't find it a problem to reach down and turn them in live situations.

Roughly the size of a TV remote, the aluminum-alloy enclosure has front-mounted input and output jacks, a center-negative jack for the included nine-volt adapter and an LED above each foot switch to indicate on/off.

With a circuit that delivers quality tones without excessive noise, the Triple Threat's distortion is easy to dial in for lead and dirty rhythm, and it was responsive to the volume controls on our test guitars, which included an Epiphone Joe Bonamassa 1963 SG Custom and a PRS SE Swamp Ash Special that's armed with a variety of humbucker and single-coil options. The Threat's gain is in the range of an SD-9 and pedals of that ilk, and there was plenty of output to overdrive the amps we used it with: a Fender Deluxe Reverb and '48 Dual Professional, and a Vox AC15. I liked leaving the distortion on and going between clean and grind by riding the guitar volume, and the pedal's tone knob could also be turned down quite low for creamy distortion that didn't sacrifice clarity. The circuit doesn't impart a lot of midrange color either, which allowed the guitars' distinctive personalities to come through, even at high gain levels.

The phaser is a good choice here, and I like how you can set it for stony MXR Phase 90/EHX Small Stone swirl, as well as shimmering sounds that can nudge into chorus and rotary territory depending on how you set depth and rate controls. The effect has the analog sweetness that's so vibey and cool when used to round off the highs like Eddie Van Halen would, adding color and meaty texture in doing so. The circuit does suck signal, so it's nice there's a level control you can adjust to keep from losing punch when the phase is kicked on.

The all-essential effect here is echo, and it's a good one as it's bone simple and effective, offering warm, tape-style delays that can be dialed in for everything from short reflective and slap-back effects to ambient echoes of up to 600ms that fade out with progressively grainy repeats. These can be made to trail on endlessly when you want to create spacey sound effects by manipulating the time and level knobs. Note that the latter only adjusts echo volume and does not boost output. Here's where a dedicated output level control would be handy, although the format would have to expand slightly to accommodate it (in which case, why not add a tuner while you're at it?).

As it stands, though, the Triple Threat is a cool multi-effector, and an ideal thing to put in your gig bag when you need just a few effects in a package that takes up less floor space than a lot of single-effect pedals. Kudos to Jack White and Donner for creating this great-sounding and affordable piece of hardware.

guitar VERDICT

Three excellently executed effects pedals, with a form factor much smaller than most standalone pedals. The Triple Threat combines versatility and quality while freeing up gig bag real estate.

- Small, elegant design that offers three good-sounding effects
- None

DONNER MUSIC

Web: au.donnermusic.com

RRP: $449

Boss RV-200

Boss expands its 200 series range. Review by **Trevor Curwen**

Boss has had the delay and modulation genres amply covered in both its double-footswitch 200 Series and triple-footswitch 500 Series pedals for some time, but there's only been the one large multi-reverb pedal in the RV-500. Now, however, it's time to meet its smaller sibling, the RV-200. This pedal gives you access to 12 different reverb types that you can dial in quickly from an uncomplicated hands-on interface, 127 onboard memories, a pair of footswitches that can be assigned to a range of different tasks if desired, plus various hook-up options in mono or stereo.

Initial impressions of the RV-200 are of excellent ease of use with everything you need for everyday operation instantly available from the front panel. There are certain settings, such as configuring different functions for the footswitches, that can be changed from a menu that's accessed by holding down the Density and Memory buttons, then selected and adjusted with the Time knob. Still, a nicely appointed default configuration straight out of the box means that you may not even need to go there.

All 12 reverb types are adjusted by dedicated knobs for Reverb Time, Pre-Delay and Effect Level (dry/wet mix), plus Low and High EQ (both with boost and cut), and there's also a Parameter knob that adjusts one thing specific to each reverb type. For the Room reverb, it selects four different room sizes, while for the Modulate reverb it sets the modulation depth in a range from 0 to 100. In addition, you can set six different degrees of reverb density using a front-panel button, subtly thickening the reverb trail.

With this amount of tweaking available, it's good that there are 127 onboard user memories to which you can save your favourite sounds. Four memories are available by default on the front panel, making things nicely manageable, and you can increase this up to the full 127.

Besides scrolling through presets, the Memory footswitch can be held down to put it into Hold mode in which a press will sample a portion of what you played and let it playback continuously, allowing you to play guitar over it. Besides Hold, you can alternatively configure Fade, Warp and Twist facilities for different outcomes.

So, what of the reverb types? Well, the four traditional staples are all here – Room, Hall, Plate and Spring – and all do their job with plenty of variation to dial in what you need. Beside the four different room sizes, you get Small, Medium and Large Halls that give you an accurate rendition of the size of the emulated space, while the Plate reverb has adjustable damping via the Parameter knob, which does a great job of blending the sound exactly into your tone. Next, Spring offers you the choice of one, two or three springs. The single spring sounds boxy and has a bongy resonance to it, creating a lo-fi vibe that some might find a use for, but we preferred the two- and three-spring renditions of an amp's onboard spring tank.

If you like sustained pad sounds sitting behind your tone, the Shimmer reverb has a bright, metallic cloud of upper-octave harmonics with adjustable shrillness. More engaging is the newly developed Arpverb, said to produce "dreamlike reverberations based on an arpeggio sound theme". Here, sympathetic pitch-shifted arpeggios are generated for interesting harmonic movement to complement your sound. Adjustable attack via the Parameter knob emphasises the individual notes in the sequence for a pleasant trickle of sparkle and chime. For a more conventional fairy dusting of the reverb trail, Modulate builds in classy chorus in varying degrees.

Moving on, Sloverb has Boss's vintage Slow Gear pedal in its DNA. Here, your guitar and the reverb swells in. It's a really nice musical effect and is at best when the Parameter knob is set to zero. Advancing the knob adds in dry sound, so you start getting your note attack back. Interestingly, if you set the Effect Level to zero and the Parameter knob the same, you can have the swell effect without reverb.

Giving your delay pedal a break, the +Delay type combines delay and reverb, and the Parameter knob turns up the level of delay, while the Time knob sets a delay time between 10ms and one second (there's no adjustment for delay feedback, but then the number of repeats programmed in here seems to work really well). Low down on the Time knob there's some metallic trash-can ambiences, but further up the dial you can balance the delay and reverb for some very practical combined sounds.

Of the final three settings, Lo-Fi is just plain nasty by design! It's not just lo-fi reverb that's added to normal guitar sound; an overall harsh distortion is applied as well, with the Parameter knob offering 10 different levels of distortion. The Gated reverb cuts the trail dead, rather than letting it decay, and you can set how long the burst of reverb lasts. Finally, Reverse does as you'd expect and has a high-cut filter to determine how sharp or dull it gets.

While the pedal's own footswitches offer useful performance capability, there's plenty more control to be had by adding an expression pedal or external footswitches, or by hooking up a MIDI controller to which many functions can be assigned. MIDI also offers the opportunity to chain multiple 200 Series pedals and select memories on all of them at once, making the RV-200 an ideal ambience companion to the DD-200 Digital Delay pedal. There's a large selection here: plenty useful, others not so.

VERDICT

This pedal simply screams practicality. It won't take up much space on your board and it's easy to use. Overall, a competitively priced way to add full reverb and flexibility to your pedalboard.

- Decently sized unit for pedalboards
- Practical hands-on operation
- Useful range of reverbs
- Onboard presets

- The unit's inability to display the letter M, instead showing N, is quite amusing...

BOSS / ROLAND AUSTRALIA

Ph: 02 9982 8266 Web: www.boss.info/au/

RRP: $369

Zoom R4 MultiTrak

Zoom proves that maybe the mythical pocket studio is not so mythical. Review by **Steve Henderson**

If you're old enough to remember 1979's Teac 144 Portastudio, or the follow-up Tascam 244, you'll easily "get" the Zoom R4. The 144 was a simple 4-track recorder/mixer about the size of a briefcase that used both sides of a standard cassette tape in the one direction. It allowed anyone to lay down a track, layer three more on top, then mix as required. It was revolutionary, and gave loads of musos their first experience with multi-track recording, as well as their first experience with wow and flutter as the tape stretched. It had limited facilities, for sure, but what a cool device. Everyone agreed it was a thousand dollars well spent. Check out Springsteen's Nebraska – you'll get the idea.

With all the options available today, including computer programs with unlimited tracks and clever plug-ins, the folks at Zoom have done us a huge favour by producing their own, updated version of the Portastudio. The R4 MultiTrak is digital, with almost unlimited recording time, a footprint about the size of an iPhone 8, and costs well under $400. And, with typical Zoom efficiency, they've managed to squeeze into it more features, more facilities, and simply more bang-for-buck, than anyone might imagine.

The Zoom R4 uses 32-bit float recording for a beautifully accurate reproduction. The mixer appears to be just four faders but, in the software, there's a full tone set per channel, various studio and pedal effects, and a separate bounce track for getting the most out of the available tech. Record four parts, mix them to the bounce track, and, if you don't like the bounced mix, hit "undo" and have another go at it. Then lay down some more tracks.

Getting started is easy: two XLR/Jack combo ports give you immediate access but, if that's not immediate enough, there's an on-board omni-directional microphone for when it's just you and the R4. For the first test drive, I used the Zoom's microphone, assigned to Track 1, to record a Maton MSH-210 dreadnought. Then I simply enabled Track 2 for some incidental guitar parts, then switched to Track 3 for a cajon part (yes, I know it should have been first), then to Track 4 to lay down some shimmery 12-string. I mixed these to the bounce track and then added a vocal on the now-free Track 1. Too easy.

For the next tune, I used the XLR/Jack connectors. But first, I pulled up a rhythm pattern from the R4's drum groove library. Did I mention the drum machine earlier? It has dozens of realistic loops and grooves. I used a dreamy 4/4 loop as the bed, then plugged a fretless Stingray into Channel 1, added some of the on-board compression, and played a kind of loop that gradually developed over 64 bars. Next, it was a D-28 with a U-87 to bring out all the woody articulation, adding some compression and a little reverb. Then came a vocal track using a CAD Trion 7000, with some echo and reverb. The Zoom R4 easily switches from one instrument to another. There's no input trim to be adjusted: the R4 automatically adjusts. Patching is all internal too: stay connected to the one input and just switch to the next track – it's just one button. It all happens in glorious living colour on a large LCD screen and the recording controls are those very familiar tape player transport buttons, so it's a no brainer.

The R4 is not just a fun gadget (which it is), it's a pro-quality ideas library. There's plenty of info online about its other great features (like amp sims and guitar effects) but the important issues here are recording quality, size and convenience. The R4 is small enough to fit in a small gig bag or a large coat pocket, and the convenience of its plug 'n' play technology means that an idea can be recorded in just moments. The quality of the recording means that it can be exported, via the audio interface, to Logic or Pro Tools without any audio degradation. Sensibly, the power port is a USB-C but it will run on four AAs, and the recording media is a micro SDHC compatible with cards up to a terabyte, so it's quite a step up from the TEAC's 45 minutes.

The Zoom R4 MultiTrak is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Deceptively simple in appearance, its user interface hides a wealth of features that are all very useful, very musical, and super-easy to access. There are features within the software but, to record and multitrack, you don't have to scroll through pages of a digital menu – just push a couple of buttons and do it. While smart phone apps offer a lot of convenience, none of them offer the audio fidelity or the practical, hands-on accessibility that the R4 has in abundance. I've rarely seen a piece of gear that is so feature packed yet so simple to use. How much do I like the R4? They're not getting this one back.

VERDICT

The Zoom R4 packs a load of features into a tiny form factor that doesn't skimp on fidelity, making it perfect for home and in-transit recording.

- High quality audio
- Familiar control layout
- Simple to operate
- Loads of features

- None

DYNAMIC MUSIC

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HOW I WROTE...

"THE EYE OF THE TIGER"

FRANKIE SULLIVAN TELLS HOW SYLVESTER STALLONE'S REQUEST FOR A ROCKY III THEME GAVE SURVIVOR THEIR SIGNATURE HIT.

BY MARK MCSTEA

Survivor circa 1984. (from left) Stephan Ellis, Jim Peterik, Frankie Sullivan, Jimi Jamison and Marc Droubay. (Photo by Richard E. Aaron/Redferns)

No song is a guaranteed smash, but when it serves as the theme for a hit movie, its odds increase dramatically. That's what Survivor learned when they were asked to write the signature tune for Sylvester Stallone's Rocky III sequel in 1982. The result was "The Eye of the Tiger," which went on to become a worldwide chart topper.

But the song's co-writers — Survivor guitarist Frankie Sullivan and guitarist/keyboardist Jim Peterik — faced a daunting task. Stallone had already chosen Queen's 1980 monster hit "Another One Bites the Dust" for an early cut of the movie, but the song got axed: Either United Artists (which produced the film) nixed it for being too old, or Queen denied permission for its use. "I actually saw it on the film at the studio when I was there with Sly," Sullivan confirms. Whatever the reason, the result was a make-or-break opportunity for Survivor, whose first two albums had charted at just 169 and 82, respectively.

A FIGHT TO THE FINISH

As Sullivan explains, the deal was instigated by Tony and Ben Scotti, owners of Survivor's label, Scotti Brothers Records, over dinner at Rao's Italian-American restaurant in Los Angeles. "They were all good friends," he says. "Tony was real smart, and he said to Sly, 'I've got this band, maybe we could help each other.' Tony asked Sly to call me, which he did. That dinner was probably the best thing that ever happened to my career."

Stallone sent Sullivan a videotape of the film, but out of caution he included only its first 10 minutes. "I called him up and said I needed to see the whole film to write the song," Sullivan says. "Which wasn't true; I just wanted to see what happened in the movie. I reassured him, 'Dude, I'm not going to make bootleg copies in my garage!' He laughed and had a copy of the movie hand-delivered."

Sullivan admits he and Peterik felt pressure writing the song, knowing that the potential reward was immense. "It was tense, and we were struggling to complete it," he says. "The music took about 10 minutes, but it took three days to get the lyrics right. We had 90 percent of them, but we couldn't come up with a title." He found what they needed while browsing a copy of the script. "There was the part where Apollo Creed says Rocky used to have the eye of the tiger. And that was our title."

PUMP UP THE VOLUME

The recording session itself took very little time. "We recorded the demo for it really quick," Sullivan says. "I used a Les Paul into a 50-watt Marshall JMP." As Sullivan told The Guardian in 2020, the Les Paul had a headstock break that he had repaired himself out of necessity. "I couldn't afford another one, so I glued it back together."

The completed demo was soon delivered to Stallone, who assumed it was the final recording. "I told him that what we had given him was the demo version, and he said, 'What the fuck is a demo?'" Sullivan recalls with a laugh. "He said that's the version he's using."

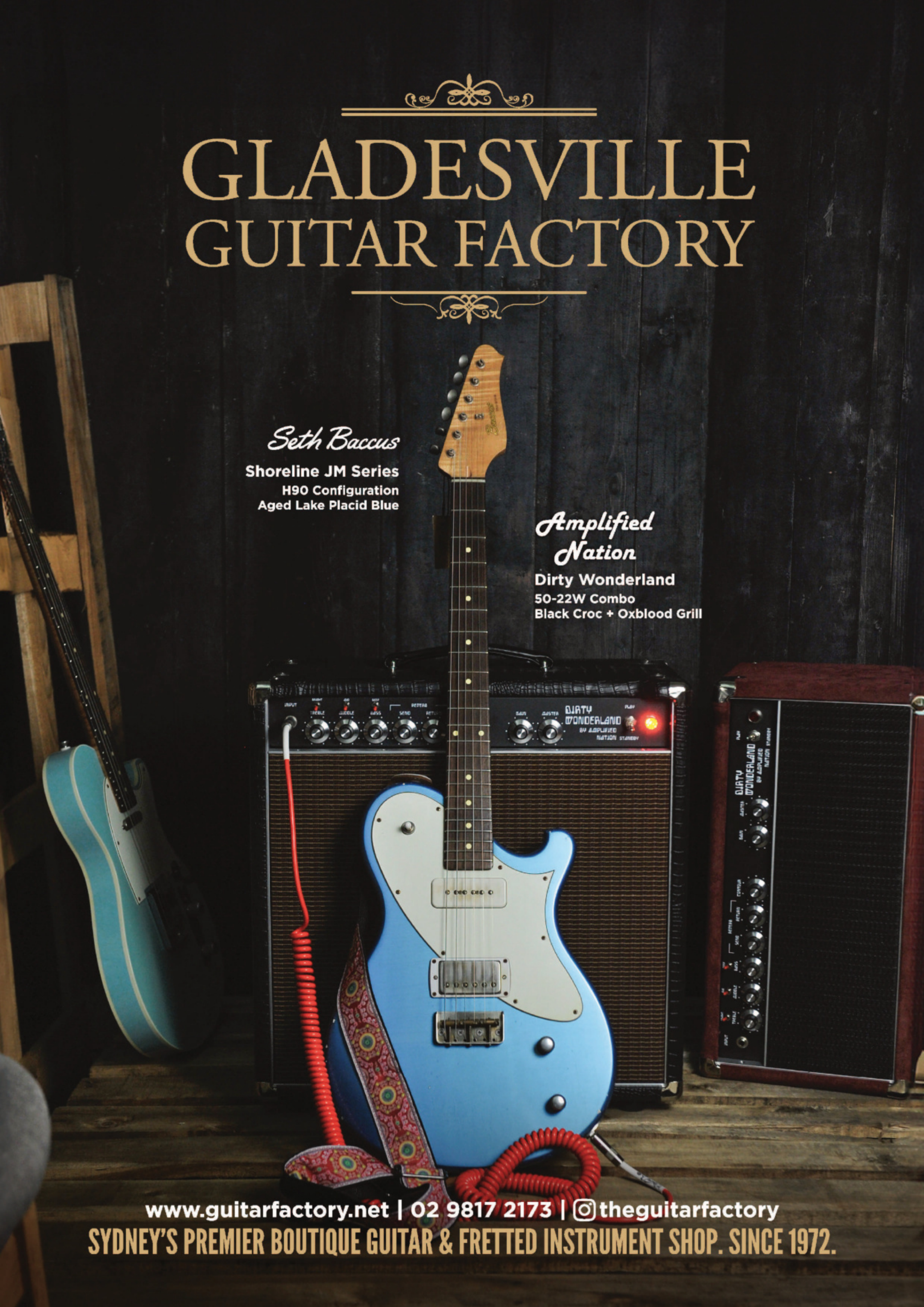
Even so, Stallone wasn't happy with one aspect of the recording. "He asked me about the sound of the song and why old AC/DC records sounded so powerful," the guitarist says. "And I told him about tape compression — how great it sounds when you slam it into the red." To demonstrate, Sullivan ran the tape and pushed the faders higher until Stallone liked what he heard. "Sly said, 'That's it right there.' I was worried that it would be too distorted, but he said 'Print it,' and that was the version that he used in the film."

"I TOLD HIM WHAT WE HAD GIVEN HIM WAS THE DEMO VERSION, AND HE SAID, 'WHAT THE F*CK IS A DEMO?'"

'ROCkY' ROAD

The global success of "The Eye of the Tiger" gave Survivor the fame they needed, while it brought its writers huge financial rewards. "I had a great manager," Sullivan says. "He was way ahead of the game with publishing, and he made sure that I got everything that was due to me. I bought a Porsche 911 and a whole load of great old guitars, including a few '50s Les Pauls, an original Flying V and a lot of '50s Strats. I've got over 200 blue-chip guitars."

The memory of seeing the movie in a theater for the first time still stirs up strong feelings for Sullivan. "I actually got goosebumps. It just slammed. I was driving home afterward, and three rock radio stations were playing our song. I mean, we had Rocky III for our MTV video. How could we fail?"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